



MT. ROSE REFORMED
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

There Is None Besides Me

Reverend Scott Johnson | October 12, 2025 | Exodus 20:3

Old Testament Reading

The Old Testament reading, like I said, it's just one verse. It's verse three of Exodus chapter 20. And this is the infallible, the inerrant word of God. So Exodus 20, verse three: "You shall have no other gods before me."

New Testament Reading

And our New Testament reading is 1 John chapter five, 1 John chapter five, verses 19 through 21. Verse John 5:19 through 21: "We know that we are from God and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true, in his son, Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols." The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

You may turn back to Exodus chapter 20. As you know, we are going through the 10 commandments, or we've just started going through the 10 commandments. So today our focus is on the first commandment. And that's why we just heard verse three this morning.

We live in a time in which we are constantly faced with a bewildering array of options that we have to choose from in life's little decisions, in life's big decisions. For example,

when I was a kid and our family needed to buy a phone, things were pretty straightforward. We'd go to the store and there'd be about five models to choose from and we had to choose. Of course, they were all landline phones. And we had to choose between a rotary dial and a touch-tone dial. That was a big choice. Some of you will remember that. We had to choose the color of the phone. And that was about it. It was pretty easy.

But today, when you go to buy a phone, and of course I'm talking about a cell phone, there are dozens, if not hundreds, of phones to choose from. You have to decide what you want. Do you want a smartphone, a dumb phone, a flip phone, a foldable phone? Which operating system do you want? You've got two families of phones to choose from. What size of phone do you want? How much memory do you want it to have? What features do you want to come with it? You have to choose a case. You have to choose a color. You have to choose the accessories that you want. And then you have to choose a carrier. Are you going to go with one of the major carriers or one of the discount carriers? Then you have to figure out what plan is best for you: an individual plan, a family plan, prepaid plan, a postpaid plan. How much data do you need? Do you want international calling and texting?

And the decisions go on and on. And then once you do have your phone, you have to choose from the app store some apps out of the thousands that are available that you want to download on your phone. And so when it comes to even a relatively trivial and unimportant decision such as a phone, you have dozens and dozens of decisions to make and we face the same kind of array of options when it comes to the much bigger, more consequential decisions in life. Where should I go to school? What classes should I take this semester? What should I major in? What job or career should I pursue? Where should I live? If you have children, the decisions just keep coming at you. How should we educate our children? Are we going to send them to school? Are we going to homeschool them? Where will they go to school?

And the list goes on and on and our lives are filled with endless choices to make among a seemingly infinite number of possibilities. And that includes what is the most

important, what is the most consequential decision that you and I will ever make in this life, and that is whom or what will I worship? Which religion will I follow? Will I choose no religion at all? Who or what will be my God, or my gods, or my goddesses? Our world is one of extraordinary religious pluralism and there are as many religions and worldviews that we can try out as there are sneakers at the mall that we can try on.

A woman called me once on the church phone, and as we were talking, I asked her about her church background, and her answer literally sounded like a classroom lecture on comparative religions. She had basically tried out just about everything that was out there. And this, at least, is one area that we have in common with the Israelites in Moses' day. They certainly did not have as many choices in their lives on a day-to-day basis as we do, but they did have a huge variety of gods to choose from while they were still in Egypt. They had a whole smorgasbord of deities that they could worship. There were the gods of the fields, the gods of the rivers, the gods of light and dark, sun gods, storm gods, gods and goddesses of love and war, and the list goes on and on.

And then after their exodus from Egypt, as the Israelites were preparing to enter the land of Canaan, they would be brought into a place where they would be surrounded by pagan peoples who also worshiped a whole host of different deities. There were the Baals and the Asherahs and the Molechs and then all the other gods and the goddesses of the Canaanite people. And so the Israelites, as they came out of Egypt, as they were preparing to enter the land of Canaan, they were a people who would be and who were surrounded by literally or virtually innumerable gods and goddesses, all who clamored for their service and their worship.

But of course, the people of Israel, they belonged to the Lord. They belong to the true and the living God, the creator of heaven and earth, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God who set them apart in love, the God who chose them, the God who heard their cries, who rescued them from their oppression and misery in Egypt.

And from the perspective of the Lord, from God's perspective, the choice that faced the Israelites was very simple. It was very clear. And it was this: either you serve and worship me alone, or you don't serve and worship me at all. That was the choice. It was

very straightforward. Either you worship the Lord, the true God, or you don't worship him at all.

Verse three: "You shall have no other gods before me." And this is what the first commandment's all about. For the Israelites, whom would they worship? Would it be the Lord or other gods? For us, whom will we worship? Will it be the true God or other gods? And so as we look at this first commandment, we'll ask these two questions. First of all, what does the first commandment mean for the people of Israel then? And secondly, what does the first commandment mean for you and me today as believers in Jesus Christ?

What Did the First Commandment Mean to the People of Israel Then?

The best place, I think, to start with the first commandment is the phrase "before me." Verse three, again, "You shall have no other gods before me." The phrase is a little ambiguous. Does it mean that the Israelites were not to put any other God in front of the Lord? As long as they put the Lord first, was that okay then if they had other gods, just as long as the Lord was number one? Or, does "before me" mean that the Lord was demanding an exclusive allegiance to himself? The Israelites were to have no other gods, period. In other words, is the Lord demanding that he have the first place among gods, or that the Israelites serve and worship him as only, or their one and only God, and worship him alone?

Well, in Hebrew, the words "before me" are literally "before my face." And what that expression implies is, and what it means is, to have another God and to worship the Lord at the same time is to provoke God to his face. It is an offense to him. To worship anything other than the Lord was to insult the Lord, the God who created them and who redeemed them. And so in the first commandment, the Lord was not just demanding the first place in the hearts of the Israelites, but he was demanding their absolute, their exclusive allegiance and fidelity to him and worship of him as their God, as their Lord. We might say, "You shall have no other gods beside me," or "over against me." And so

the commandment categorically forbade any god or idol to occupy the place of the Israelites. They were to give their entire devotion and worship and obedience to the Lord and to Him alone.

And in commanding this, the Lord did something that was absolutely unique among the various gods and goddesses of the ancient Near East. He did something that was unusual. It was unique to him, and that is he demanded that his people worship him alone, that they have no other gods. None of the gods and the goddesses of the peoples of the ancient Near East in Moses' time put that same demand on their people. As long as they worshiped them, that was fine. They could go and worship other gods as well, but as long as they brought their worship of this particular god, that's what they had to do.

Now part of the reason that the Lord commanded this exclusive devotion of his people is because it was the Lord alone, without the help of other gods, but the Lord alone who rescued his people out of their slavery in Egypt. Last week we looked at the preface or the prologue to the Ten Commandments. Verse two: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." And because the Lord was their God, because the Lord alone brought them out of Egypt, he was alone to be worshiped by the people of Israel.

But God's zero-tolerance approach to having other gods was more than that. It was not only because he alone brought them out of their slavery from Egypt, but also because of who he is. He alone is the true and living God. He is the God of whom it is written, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Just before God gave the 10 commandments to the people of Israel, he declared to them through Moses in Exodus 19, verse five, "All the earth is mine." And since He alone is the true God, the living God, the creator and Lord of all, He alone is worthy of the devotion and the worship, not only of the people of Israel, but of all creation. All creation owes to the Lord, to God, worship, praise, service, obedience, because He alone is God.

And yet, the question remains in the first commandment, when it says "You shall have no other gods before me," what are these gods? Who are these gods? The first

commandment seems to suggest that though the Lord demanded the worship of him alone, that in some way there were other gods that had some kind of existence that the Israelites were not to worship. So does the first commandment suggest that there's some reality to other gods besides the true God? Well, the answer is yes and no. It is no insofar as the Bible is very clear that there is no other God but God himself, but the Creator, the God of the Bible, the God and Father, the Lord Jesus Christ. There are no other deities that have any kind of existence or reality whatsoever. Isaiah 45:21: "There is no other God besides me, a righteous God and a savior. There is none besides me." 1 Corinthians 8:4: "Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that an idol has no real existence and that there is no God but one." And so on the one hand, no, there are no other gods besides the Lord. False gods, they have no true existence. They are not real.

But at the same time, there are other gods in the sense that it is very real for someone to take the service, the worship, the affection that is due to God alone and to give it to another entity or another thing, even if that thing does not truly exist. And when that happens, that thing, whether it is some part of God's creation, whether it is the pure product of man's imagination, whatever it is, it has a certain reality because it is worshiped as a God.

And this is what the Bible calls idolatry. Idolatry is making into a God that which is not a God. Idolatry is serving and worshiping and trusting in some created thing or perhaps even some imagined thing rather than worshiping and trusting in the Lord, the true God. And idolatry is very, very real. Romans 1:25 speaks of the natural, what people do in their own belief. "They exchange the truth about God for a lie and worship and serve the creature rather than the creator, who is blessed forever. Amen."

You can put it this way: God gave the first commandment to the Israelites, not because the existence of other gods is real, not because other gods truly do exist, but because idolatry is real. And so an idol has no real existence, but idolatry does. And that idolatry was a very real temptation, a very real problem for the Israelites. We learn from the prophet Ezekiel that while they lived in Egypt, the Israelites did in fact take on the

worship of the gods of the Egyptians. Ezekiel 20, verse eight: “But they rebelled against me and were not willing to listen to me. None of them cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt.” And so while they were still in Egypt, the people of Israel worshiped the idols of Egypt. And then when they were taken out of Egypt, that propensity for the Israelites to worship false gods and not the true God, that did not leave them. It was still very much with them.

As we go on in the book of Exodus, we'll see in Exodus chapter 32, how the Israelites, they make a golden calf and they worship it. And they say, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” And so, idolatry was so much a part of the Israelites, their makeup, that in fact, when you read the Old Testament, you could actually read the Old Testament as just one long story of how the Israelites failed to keep the first commandment. How time and time again, they forsook the Lord and they worshiped and served other gods, idols. And the problem, of course, was that the Israelites were sinners. They were sinners. And it was just in their nature to forsake the Lord and go after other gods.

And of course, it's easy to see in the Israelites as we read about them doing this, but we need to also turn our attention to our own hearts. And when we do, we'll find that we are no better than them. We are no different than them. All human beings, every single human being ever since the fall of Adam and Eve are born with this tendency, this propensity to worship the creature rather than the creator, to make false gods and idols and to worship them rather than worship the true God. That is what we are by nature. We are idolaters. And there is nothing that comes more natural to us than that—to worship something other than God. And this is why this commandment is just as crucial for us as Christians today as it was for the Israelites then.

What Does the First Commandment Mean for Today's Christians?

And so this is the second question that we'll ask of this verse: what does the first commandment mean for Christians today? Now, of course, we are far, far removed from

the time of Moses and the Israelites. They were tempted to serve these gods of Egypt, and later they would be tempted to serve the gods of the Canaanites. Today, you would have a very hard time, unless you happen to be in a museum, to find an idol of Baal or Asherah or Molech. Those particular gods have come and gone.

However, there are plenty of idols in our world today, and they exert exactly the same kind of influence on our hearts as the idols in the Israelites' day exerted on their hearts. And that is, idols draw the attention, the affection, the worship that we are to give to the Lord alone and cause us or lead us to place that affection and devotion and service on some false God, something other than the Lord, than the true God.

And so we make gods out of all kinds of things. We make gods out of wealth and possessions. We make an idol out of personal comforts. We make a god of physical pleasure, of security and safety. We make idols out of fame and power. We are tempted to put our trust and hope in a politician, a leader, a man, rather than the true God and in his promises. We look to human power and wisdom to save us instead of relying on God and in his promises.

We have all kinds of idols. Perhaps the greatest idol of all in our day is the God of self. We make ourselves our own little gods. Oscar Wilde said, "To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance." And who of us hasn't felt the temptation of this lifelong romance to devote myself, to pleasing myself, to serving my interests, to loving myself, to pursuing my desires. I make myself and my desires my own little God when I say, "I will decide what is right and wrong for myself." "I will be my own moral compass." "I will choose what is right for me, what is wrong for me, and no one else will tell me what to do." "No religion will tell me what to do." "No God will tell me what to do." "I will choose my own path." "I will follow my own way." This is very much the spirit of the age. This is where we think. We all want to say with Frank Sinatra, "I did it my way." "I planned each charted course, each careful step along the byway, and more, much more than this, I did it my way." We live in a culture that exalts and glorifies the individual choice and personal freedom that we think we have an inalienable right to, to choose and do whatever seems right to us, no matter what others may say, no matter what some

tradition or religion may say. In fact, you could say that in our supposedly secular and modern and non-religious world, there is nothing that is more sacred, there is nothing that is more hallowed than the absolute autonomy of the individual.

And yet, according to the scripture, this is nothing but idolatry. This is worship of the self. And whether we make an idol of ourselves or whether we make an idol of something outside ourselves, this is what we do by nature. We all desire life and contentment and purpose and meaning. And by nature, naturally, we do not seek those things and the God who created us and the God who alone can give us true life, true purpose, true significance. And instead we seek these things and the things that God has created or in the idols of our own imagination. And when we do, we become idolaters.

John Calvin famously said that our hearts are idol factories. The manufacturing sector is going very well. It's alive and well. We are turning out idols all the time. John Calvin also said, "Every one of us from his mother's womb is expert in inventing idols." And even as Christians, as those who have come to know the true God by faith in Jesus Christ, we still feel in our hearts the struggle, we experience this conflict within us. We feel the pull, the draw to give our affections and service and devotion and worship, adulation, not to the true God who created us and redeemed us, but to some creature, to some thing in this world.

And it's not hard for us to see what has become an idol for us if we are willing to give honest answers to some kinds of questions. What do you delight in? What is the treasure of your heart? What do you think about when your thoughts are free to roam? Where do your thoughts land? What is it that you want that will finally make you happy? What do you fear the most? What would you hate the most to lose? What habits are hard for you to break? How do you spend your money?

And so the first commandment still very much speaks to you and me today, because in it, God commands you and me to put our wholehearted trust reliance and hope in him alone, to serve and to worship him alone, to seek in God alone, the life, the joy, significance that we seek in so many other places.

For the Israelites, their worship and devotion was to be given wholly to the Lord, in part because it was the Lord who redeemed them from their bondage. It was God who brought them out from their slavery in Egypt. The Lord made himself known to them in his mighty signs and wonders, the things that he did in bringing them out of the land of Egypt and speaking to them through Moses. It is the same God who now demands our absolute devotion to him today. And yet he has made himself known to us today through his son, Jesus Christ. And in Jesus Christ, we have a far greater redemption than the Israelites had from Egypt. And if your faith, if your hope are in Jesus Christ, by His obedience, by His suffering, His death and resurrection, you have been redeemed. He has saved you. Just as the Israelites were brought out of Egypt from their bondage to Pharaoh, so you have been rescued from your bondage to sin and death, from spiritual death, from condemnation. Jesus Christ has delivered you from that. He has freed you, brought you true freedom and liberation.

And so, just as the Israelites were to give their wholehearted service and worship to the Lord who saved them out of Egypt, so you are to give your wholehearted devotion, worship, obedience, and service to the God who has rescued you, the God who has come to us in His Son, Jesus Christ. In the New Testament reading that we read from 1 John, just before John tells his readers, and he leaves them with these final words, "little children, keep yourselves from idols." But just before he says that, he says in verse 20, and he's speaking of Jesus, "He is the true God and eternal life."

For us as Christians, we could put it this way: "You shall have no other gods before Jesus." "You shall have no other gods before the God who has come to us in His Son, Jesus Christ." And it's for this reason that the first commandment, also as we understand the first commandment in the light of the coming of Jesus Christ, it absolutely rules out the popular idea, the attractive idea, that all religions are essentially the same, that all spiritual paths lead to the same God, that anyone who is genuinely, sincerely following the dictates of his religion or philosophy will end up at the same place. No. What the first commandment says is anyone who does not serve and worship God through his son, Jesus Christ, anyone who does not come to God through Christ, he is breaking the first commandment, he is worshiping an idol. And so no matter

who or what his God may be, no matter how sincere his belief may be, no matter how ancient his religion may be, if a person is not worshiping God by faith in Jesus Christ, the one in whom God has revealed himself to us, he is not worshiping God at all.

And Jesus himself said the very same thing when he said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." This is the Lord's commentary on the first commandment. This is what Jesus has to say about the first commandment: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

How about you? Have you come to the Father through Jesus Christ? Have you repented of your sin and put your trust and hope for salvation in the Son of God, in Jesus Christ alone? Is He your Savior? If He is, then you have God as your Father. And you have come to know the true God who says, "You shall have no other gods before me."

One thing that the first commandment means for you and me as a Christian is that we are called to walk by faith. This is a command for us to daily walk by faith. Sometimes when we read the 10 commandments, the first commandment is pretty easy. We kind of look at it as kind of a given. We take it for granted. "Of course, I don't believe in any other gods than the God of the Bible. He is the true God, I believe that. I'll put a check mark by the first commandment. Let's go on to the second, see how we're doing there." But this commandment requires of us far more than just that we believe that the God of the Bible is the only true God, that we have no other gods before him. But we are to think, we are to feel, we are to speak, we are to act, we are to live according to that truth. We are to think God's thoughts after him. We are to delight in what God delights in. We are to hate what God hates. We are to find joy and hope in the promises of God. And when we suffer, we are to suffer with patience, with steadfastness, trusting in the Lord, that he is working even in this affliction to fulfill his sovereign purposes for me. And so in every circumstance of life, whether good or ill, the first commandment directs us to acknowledge the sovereign hand of God, to submit to his gracious rule over us, to hope in his word, and that's what it means to walk by faith, to live as though what we

believe is really true, that there is no other God but God, that he is our God, that he is ruling over us for our good.

And because the first commandment, along with every other commandment of God, requires of us not 85% conformity, or 99% conformity, but perfect 100% conformity to that commandment. Anything less than perfect trust in God, anything less than wholehearted worship and service and obedience to God at all times, in every circumstance, anything less than perfect submission to His will, all the time, anything less than that is sin. And with that in mind, this is a good time to remind ourselves that although this is what the law of God requires of us, the same law cannot enable us to keep it. Only the spirit of Christ, only by the grace of God can you and I begin to keep this commandment or any of the commandments of God.

And so when you hear the first commandment and when you begin to realize all that it means for you, all that it requires of you, how it is a commandment that bears upon you moment by moment, day by day, to have, to hold up God as the true God, to worship Him alone. As you understand it, the response that you should have, the first response is not, it's not, "Now I know what I need to do. According to the first commandment, I am going to try harder to keep it." but rather your first response should be this: "I give thanks to God that his son, Jesus Christ died for me." That with God, there is grace. There is forgiveness that I've broken this commandment. I break this commandment daily. Nevertheless, there is mercy and forgiveness with Jesus Christ. And then your next response should be, "I'm so grateful to God for His mercy and grace. I'm so thankful for this forgiveness in Christ. I'm so thankful that God has made Himself known to me, that I want to please Him. I want to know Him better. I want to serve Him. I want to worship. I want to give myself, my life, my entire being to His worship and devotion and service. And I will look to my Savior Jesus for the grace and the strength to keep this commandment."

And God gives us grace. And as he gives us his spirit, as he gives us grace to keep this commandment, what you will find is that in keeping this commandment, you will find that that is the way to true freedom. That is the way to true freedom. What idolatry is, is

bondage. Idolatry is slavery. Whenever we give ourselves to serve and to worship and to pursue some other thing other than God himself, we become a slave to that thing. You see it most clearly, of course, in an addiction, an addiction to a substance such as drugs or alcohol, even an addiction to social media or compulsive shopping, whatever it may be, it is a kind of slavery. It is devoting yourself, giving yourself to this thing, to be its servant, its slave. And it becomes your God. Galatians 4:8: "Formally, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods."

But the first commandment is the way of freedom. The first commandment is the way of freedom because God commands us to worship him exclusively, to worship the true God who is a God who gives us freedom. God is all about freedom. His salvation is freedom for his people. It was for freedom that the Lord set the Israelites free from their bondage to Pharaoh. And it was for freedom that the Lord forbade the Israelites after he rescued them from Egypt to have any other gods before him because he wanted them to walk in that freedom. And it is according to Galatians 5:1, "for freedom that Christ has set us free." So the truest freedom is the freedom to devote yourself wholeheartedly, entirely, unreservedly to the knowledge and the service and the worship of the true God. And so that's why God commands us in the first commandment to have no other gods before him. But it's also why he has given us his son, Jesus Christ, that we may experience this true freedom, this true joy in life of having the true God as our God, both now and forevermore.

Let's pray.