



# The First Commandment as a Practical Guide

by Pastor Glenn Huebel

## You shall have no other gods.

What kind of life is described by the first commandment? What would a life lived in obedience to the commandment look like? Would it look like the life of a hermit, so intent upon holy things that it requires separation and isolation from the world? Or would it look like the life of a “holier than thou” religious zealot, someone who held the world of sinners in contempt while focusing all attention upon rigid obedience to God’s rules? Or would it be a life of humble love and gentle service to mankind, and quiet confidence in the goodness, wisdom, and power of God? The first model is the approach of

religious asceticism as exemplified in monasticism. The second is a picture of Pharisaic piety. The last is a picture of Jesus Christ, the one and only life lived in obedience to the first commandment. His life alone is an accurate picture of true fear, love, and trust in God.

When we place our lives next to the beautiful life of Jesus, who humbly lived in obedience to His Father’s will, we can see clearly what fallen creatures we are. I wouldn’t be sleeping soundly in the back of a small boat during a fierce storm on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 4:38). I have a hard enough time sleeping through the night in a comfortable bed because of the relatively small cares and anxieties of life that keep me wide awake (Ps 127:2). Even when I try to “be still” and remember that He is God (Ps 46:10) I fail – miserably sometimes. My heart is not at rest in Him because I do not trust God as Jesus did. Do you? I would probably not boldly speak the plain truth if faced

with the prospect of crucifixion (Matt 26:64). I have a hard enough time holding fast to the truth without compromise when faced with relatively minor unpleasant consequences – like being disliked or slandered. I compromise and bow to worldly forces and threats because I do not fear God above all, as Jesus did. Do you? I would have a very difficult time giving up all my possessions and honor to go to a foreign country to preach the gospel to people who didn’t care about it (John 6:51). I have a hard enough time returning a relatively small portion of my earthly blessings to God, and even then I foolishly think I have made a sacrifice. That is because I do not truly love God with all my heart, soul, and mind as Jesus did. Do you? Like Paul, I really would like to be like Jesus, but, like Paul, I find that I am only a wretched man in the light of the law (Rom 7: 24), especially the first commandment.

The first commandment does not hold up before us a goal that we can strive to achieve through diligent effort and self discipline. This commandment reveals how deeply human nature has fallen through sin, and leads us, hopefully, to acknowledge the reality in genuine repentance. It leads

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Rembrandt, *Moses With the Ten Commandments*. 1659. Oil on canvas, 168.5 cm x 136.5 cm. Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

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*That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name. —John 20:31*



Andrea di Lione. *Adoration of the Golden Calf*, 17th–18th century. Oil on canvas, 38 x 52 (96.5 x 132.1 cm)

us to confess with Paul, “Wretched man that I am. Who shall deliver me from this body of death?” That is the primary purpose of this commandment and I pray that it has done its work on our hearts. Our salvation is not found in our doing, but in God’s mercy through Jesus, who lived this commandment as our substitute and died to make atonement for our miserable failure to fear, love, and trust in God.

This commandment, like all the others, also has a teaching or instructive purpose for believers in Christ (Ps 119:98). It is a fundamental pillar in fulfilling Scripture’s secondary purpose to “teach, rebuke, correct, and train in righteousness that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16). How do we believers live in this world? How do we recognize the lies of the devil who desires to deceive us into straying paths that lead to destruction? How do we recognize the voice and will of the flesh so that we may crucify it daily, and how do we recognize the prompting of the Spirit so that we may follow His lead? We can do nothing apart from Christ (faith). The law can never motivate or

empower us to live obediently, but we still need to gain practical wisdom so that we can avoid the errors and pitfalls in this dangerous world. Sheep live by the Gospel, but they still need the instruction and guidance of the law.

Perhaps the best way to explore this commandment in its practical teaching function is to address how it can be used to

teach our believing children how to walk as Christians in this world.

First, our children need a focus, a target, a benchmark to set their course and make their decisions in life. Without this they will have no compass and they will be subject to every wind of doctrine, by human cunningness, by craftiness in deceitful schemes (Eph 4:14).

Without this they will never discover and understand who they are and what their purpose is. Obviously, then, it is vitally important that this focal point is the CORRECT and TRUE benchmark for life.

Unfortunately, there are many voices contending for the position of leadership. Only ONE voice will lead them safely through this vale of tears to eternal life. All other voices that stand against His voice, no matter how persuasive or charismatic, will lead to misery and death, and to groping in darkness.

Our children need to be taught from infancy that they have a benevolent Maker who loves them, who called them to be His beloved children in baptism, and who rules heaven and earth for them. The world will try to convince them that objective truth does not really exist, and that all cultures and their gods are equally

valid. We must expose this lie and prepare our children to resist it steadfastly. Just as ancient navigators found their way by looking at the stars, we must teach our children to navigate their lives by continually focusing on their Maker and Redeemer, not their feelings or the wisdom of the world. God ALONE cares for their soul and wellbeing. He ALONE is worthy of their trust. This must be inculcated with diligence, especially in our relativistic world.

Our children must also learn to recognize and resist idolatry, for this sin is often disguised by euphemism. Israel rarely ever knowingly abandoned the true God. They simply embraced forms of idolatry under the holy name of God. Christianity has often departed from the paths of righteousness in this way. Our children must learn to guard their hearts from false and foolish attachments.

Though it may seem strange, we must help our children and remind ourselves to guard against self deification. This is not as easy as it may seem. The natural fallen heart is inclined toward self worship, and that natural tendency is actually being encouraged by many today, especially in our culture. A recent high school commencement address went viral on YouTube. The speaker had the gall to tell the graduates the unvarnished truth that they were “not special.” He meant, of course, that the cultural conditioning affirming their “self image” and leading them to believe that the world revolves around them and owes them, etc. is a mirage. If they believe such a lie they will face a rude awakening in the world. I suspect that some of the parents in the audience were highly offended, but that is a message Christian

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## First Commandment, cont.

children should learn in their homes at a very early age. We must be constantly reminded that “It is God who has made us and not we ourselves” (Ps 100:3). There is a sense, I suppose, in which self-confidence is a positive term, but our primary goal as parents and teachers is to engender **God-confidence** (faith). Those who trust in their own strength ultimately fail (Ps 33:16-17). Those who trust in their own wisdom or intelligence ultimately resist the Word of God (1 Cor 1:20-25). Pride goes before a fall (Prov 16:18). The most dangerous and deceptive idol is the idol of the self. Our culture is actually teaching and encouraging people to establish idolatrous “high places” in their own hearts, to worship themselves. The first commandment exposes this foolishness and helps us see things clearly. Children who trust in God know that they were specially created in His sight and redeemed by the precious blood of His Son. They know how deeply they are loved. These are the children who can face the world with a healthy, God-pleasing confidence.

We must also be on guard against the idolatry of materialism. Substituting created things for God is as old as sin itself (Rom 1:21ff). This can be a very deceptive form of idolatry because we can still maintain formal worship of the true God while abjectly bowing down to gold, silver, pleasure, etc. Some popular forms of Christianity have even embraced materialism as the target and goal of their preaching. The Gospel is preached as the means for becoming rich in this world. This is unmitigated idolatry presented in the wrappings of Christianity. But we don’t have to become members of those churches to fall into this sin. Our heart abides where our true treasure is. By that standard we may find many idols in

our own lives. What gives you the most joy in life, the most peace? What causes you the most anxiety? What is your greatest fear? What dominates your thoughts, your hopes, your dreams? What is your definition of success and failure? What are your goals? What do honest answers to these questions tell you about where your heart is – and isn’t? Are you focusing upon temporal things or eternal things? You know the tendency of the sinful self by your own experience. You know the temptations and enticements your children will face in this world in regard to materialism. You know the rush and physical intoxication that beckons them through sexual immorality, drugs, and alcohol. You know that the philosophy of the sixties, “if it feels good, do it” is not only silly, but dangerous. If followed it will destroy relationships, bring misery to the self, and shrivel the soul. The promises of materialism seem wonderful to the novice, but they always disappoint. We don’t have to let our children learn this by painful experience. We can teach them the first commandment.

Finally, we must be on guard against human philosophies raised to the status of divine wisdom. Mankind has been inventing deities for a long time. These deities are usually gods made in man’s image. In America we have made the idea of god a consumable product. People who can best formulate a theology that pleases the consumer win the most adherents. Of course there are various theologies created to satisfy various groups. Evangelism is now a marketing technique. The idea that there is only one true God who remains the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow is a very odd concept for many – even for many Lutherans, I have discovered through the years.

The idea in American is that theology, like political positions, **MUST** change if we are to continue to meet the market’s changing demands. Teaching your children that there is only one true God and one Truth, is a countercultural endeavor. Helping your child to distinguish the voice of the true God from the deceptions of idol philosophies will require diligence and your own continued growth in the knowledge of the truth given through divine revelation. But that is the subject of the next commandment and next month’s article.

Teaching this commandment, however, is never a grievous task, for the God we worship and adore is the most wonderful Being one could ever imagine. He not only created you in His image, but loved you before the foundation of the world. He is the One who so loved you that He gave His only-begotten Son into death that He might rescue the world from destruction through sin (John 3:16). He is One who is with you always, who gives you everything you need to support body and life, who dwells in your heart through the Spirit, and who promises to bring you into a new Eden that you might be with Him forever.

***Little children, keep yourselves from idols. —1 John 5:21***

Blessings in Christ,  
Pastor Huebel





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Sunday School & Adult Bible Class: 9:30 a.m.

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## NO NEWS??????

One often heard complaint is that we do not do enough to communicate. Meetings and workdays are under-attended, events come and go with little notice...and lack of church communication is high on the list of reasons why.

**Communication, however, is a two-way street.** A bulletin is printed every week. Pastor Huebel sends out a mid-week email...every week. This newsletter is printed 11 or 12 months a year. The MemberConnect page of our website contains our church calendar, meeting minutes, and other important reports. So, those noting the lack of communication need to be sure, first of all, that they are actually **reading** these documents.

**But, people cannot read what is not printed** or uploaded. Here we are, with a **huge, blank space** on the back

page of the *Messenger*. You might also notice that we are only printing four pages this month rather than the usual eight.

**Are you a leader at Messiah and/or her schools?** Does your committee or group have an event, a study, a meeting, or other activity that the membership should know about? Then...**write about it!** Let people know. Put your event on the MemberConnect calendar. Use the bulletin for short announcements and this newsletter for longer articles and PR for your event. Then, let us all know how it went. Submit a report. Send pictures. You can upload photos on MemberConnect too.

Our next newsletter deadline is September 26. **Leadership: let us hear from you!** Email your articles to [churchoffice@messiahkeller.org](mailto:churchoffice@messiahkeller.org)

# Messiah Lutheran Classical Academy



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