



NO OTHER GODS

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Let's discuss the Second Commandment according to the oldest, that is the Jewish, enumeration of the Ten Commandments. In Christian tradition it is the First Commandment. The most common translation begins: "You shall have no other gods before me." The commandment then goes on to prohibit both making idols and worshiping idols.

Most people, when they think of this commandment understandably think that it only prohibits the worship of idols and the worship of gods such as the ancient pagan gods of rain, of fertility, all the other nature gods and chief gods such as the Roman Jupiter, and the Greek Zeus. However, there is a major problem with this understanding of the commandment. Since no one today worships these gods, let alone worships idols made of stone, most people think that this commandment is irrelevant to modern life. The irony, however, is that this commandment is not only relevant to modern life, it is in many ways the mother of all the other commandments.

Why is it so relevant today? Because today we have as many false gods as the ancients did. And why it is the mother of all the other commandments? Because if we identify false gods and avoid worshipping them, we will eliminate one of the greatest barriers to a good world – false gods. So, let's begin by defining a false god. The point of biblical monotheism is that there is only one God and that only this God, the Creator of the universe who demands that we keep these Ten Commandments, is to be worshipped. Why? First, because one God means one human race. Only if we all have the same Creator, or Father, as it were, are we all brothers and sisters. Second, having the same parent also means that no person or group is intrinsically more valuable than any other. And third, one God means one moral standard for all people. If God declares murder wrong, it is wrong for everyone, and you can't go to another god for another moral standard.

When anything else is worshipped, bad things result. Not only things that can obviously lead to evil such as the worship of power, or race, or money, or flag. But also things that are almost always seen as quite beautiful – such as art, or education or even love. Yes, any of these often wonderful things, when worshipped, can lead to terrible results.

Take art. Many of the cruelest humans in history loved beautiful music and art. But, as a music lover, I learned early in life the sad fact that great music can be used to inspire people to follow evil just as much as it can be used to inspire people to do good. The great Hollywood director Stanley Kubrick vividly made this point in his classic 1971 film, *A Clockwork Orange*. In it, men rape and murder while classical music plays in the background.

Take education. We all recognize how important education can be – from preparing people

to be able to find work to understanding the world. But education in and of itself, divorced from the higher ends of God and goodness, can lead, and often has, led to great evil. Many of the best-educated people in Germany supported Hitler and the Nazis. And almost all of the Western world's supporters of the genocidal regimes of Stalin in the Soviet Union and Mao in China were highly educated. There is nothing about a Ph.D. that guarantees a person will be wiser, kinder, or more ethical than someone with only a high school education.

The same holds true even of love. Love, of course, is so often beautiful. But it, too, can lead to evil. In the twentieth century people who put love of country above love of God and goodness often committed terrible evil.

And here's a test for you: Imagine that the pet you love and a stranger -- a person you don't know and therefore could not possibly love -- are drowning. Do you first try to save your pet or the stranger? Well, if love is an end in itself, you save your pet. But if you hold human life as a higher value than love, you won't follow love.

This Commandment made the ethical revolution of the Bible and of the Ten Commandments -- what is known as ethical monotheism -- possible. Worship the God of the Ten Commandments and you will make a good world. Worship a false god -- no matter how noble sounding -- and you will end up with a world of cruelty.

I'm Dennis Prager.