

# **Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, The Ten Commandments**

## **Session 2: Commandment 1: No other gods**

This is Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino and his teaching on the Ten Commandments. This is session 2, commandment 1: no other gods.

So we're going to start going through the Ten Commandments, and we're going to begin at the very beginning, a very good place to start with commandment number one, You shall have no other gods.

Now, imagine if you will, that you are going to build a house, right? Now, you're probably not going to do it all by yourself; you're going to get a lot of people involved in building a house for you. So, who are you going to get? Well, you're probably going to get, you know, somebody to do the foundation, you're going to get somebody to do the plumbing, you're going to get somebody to do the wiring, you're going to get somebody to do the drywall, you're going to get somebody to do the roofing, all these different people are all specialists who are all working in a particular area of your house. Now, imagine that one day you come to your property to see how the work is progressing, and you see that all those guys are gone.

And instead, there is just one guy there, working on your property, on your house. And he is working like crazy and seems to be doing a great job. And you go up to the guy, you say, Hey, what gives? And he says, I'm Bob, and I am going to build your house for you.

And you say, Really? He says, Yep. So I will do the whole thing. I will draw up the plans.

I'll dig your basement. I'll pour the concrete. I'll put in the plumbing, do the wiring, and the drywall, everything I will do for you.

I will do it better than those other guys. I will do it cheaper and faster than all those other guys. Bob shows you his credentials.

They're absolutely impeccable. And you say, Wow, this looks pretty good. And so you say, Okay, well, what's the catch? And Bob says, Here's the thing.

If you're going to go with me, then all those other guys that you hired have got to go. If you use so much as as calling somebody to put a screw in the wall, our whole contract is void. And I'll take you to court.

Now, you know, you hear that you might be a little reluctant to hire Bob, as your person here, because it would take a great deal of trust on your part to believe that

this one guy can to do can do all the jobs that all these other guys were doing. Well, welcome to the world of the ancient Israelites. Because this was really what the first commandment is kind of talking about for them.

In the land of Egypt, where the Israelites had been, you know, for quite a while, undoubtedly, they had many, many gods, the Egyptians had lots of gods, and they seem to be multiplying all the time. And there's probably little question that the Israelites themselves worshipped some of those gods of the Egyptians. I mean, when in Rome do as the Romans do, when in Egypt do as the Egyptians do, right? So very likely, the Israelites were involved in the worship of some of these Egyptian gods.

In fact, Joshua says as much in Joshua 24, he says, Who are you going to worship? Are you going to worship those gods you're worshipping down in Egypt? Yeah. Or maybe the gods that your ancestors worshipped in the land beyond the rivers, you know, the Mesopotamian gods, possibly they worship those as well. Are you going to worship the gods of the land to which you're going? We know that Baal in various forms was worshipped pretty much all over the ancient Near East. You know, did the Israelites worship Baal as well? But now the Lord is telling them, if you're going to be my people, you are going to have to give up all those other gods, and you are going to worship me and me alone.

And so this would probably have seemed to be a rather sort of a scandalous proposal to the Israelites to think that they were being told that they would have to give up all of their of the people, all of the beings in whom they had trusted and place all of their confidence in one God and one God alone. Now, to fully contemplate what is being told to the Israelites here, we have to begin with a question of what is meant by God? What did it mean to Israel to have one God or many gods? What was a God? I'm kind of amused by modern Hollywood, where it seems like, you know, that everything can be a God in some of these stories. And it's like, what, what constitutes a God? And you've got, you know, something like Thor in the, in the, world of, of Marvel, who is, who is a God, and seems kind of human in his way, but, but what, really, is the quality that makes one being a God? And this is a difficult question, I have to say.

I've actually done quite a bit of research on this in ancient Greece, and, you know, the Greeks were really one of the first people who actually speculated on what the nature of a god was. And they came up with this remarkable definition where they say, What is a god? An immortal man. What is a man? A mortal god.

If you look at the way the Greek gods behaved, you can kind of understand why they might come to that conclusion sometimes. But what is a god? The Hebrew Bible never defines it. It never tells us.

You're only to have one god. Well, what does that mean? I'm to have one of something, but I don't know what it is. We don't ever have a list of divine attributes.

Things like almighty or righteous or even immortal, like the Greeks did. And we have to recognize that even those words, and we have the word almighty, which gets translated in the Old Testament, the word most high or something of these sorts. Sometimes the translations are good, sometimes not so good.

But they don't have the same kind of connotations that we have in our day. Almighty, in the Old Testament, did not mean the same thing that almighty means to a modern theologian. It just had a different set of connotations.

They understood that God was mighty and powerful, but they didn't really contemplate what it meant to be able to do literally anything. They never even explored that concept in the Old Testament. So, a different set of theological implications here, if you can even call what they're doing theology in a sense.

Some ancient Near Eastern texts give us some basic ideas of how the people of the ancient world conceived of gods. And whether the Israelites believed some of these same things, we don't know. I mean, if they were part of the same milieu, maybe they do.

But some of the ideas. The typical Semitic word for God is apparently related to the word meaning powerful. This is the word El, the word that appears in a number of different forms, Elu in ancient Akkadian and other Mesopotamian forms.

We've got the word El, of course, which occurs in the Hebrew and also in the various Canaanite dialects. And this word is generically used to mean God. Sumerian word, dinger, we don't know what that means.

The Egyptian word, again, we really don't know. So, the idea of a god seems, at least in the Middle East, to be attached to the notion of power, of might, rather than the notion of eternity or the notion of holiness or righteousness. Those kinds of ideas might be attributes, but it seems like the most basic shared attribute of a god is the idea of power.

Seems to be. In most of the ancient Near East, there was an understanding that the gods came into existence. Outside of Israel, there doesn't seem to be an understanding of a god that eternally existed.

The heavens and the earth and some of the cosmogonies, they eternally existed. The gods did not. The gods were born.

The gods were created somehow, or the gods created themselves. But there was no understanding that they eternally existed. What else we got? Well, many of the gods were associated with natural phenomenon.

In the last lecture, we talked about Shamash, the god of justice in ancient Babylon. Shamash is the sun, the same word. It is clear that the idea of the sun can be related to the idea of justice in the sense that the sun is what reveals things, makes things clear.

And justice was viewed sometimes as a process of revealing and making things clear and plain. But other things, like the growing of the crops, the moon, the blowing of the wind, and even particular kinds of wind could be associated with particular gods. So lots of different gods are associated with natural phenomena.

And also cases of gods who were, in some sense, related to processes of life, like there are certain gods which are related to childbirth, or certain gods which are related to plagues. Middle Easterners seem to conceive of gods, in a sense, as supercharged humans who lived in the heavens. And what was the difference between a god and a human being? Well, for most people in the Middle East, the major idea seemed to have been that they were immortal in their way.

And then we can compare this to the Greek Heraclitus, who said, what are the gods? Immortal men. That same kind of idea seems to have existed in many of the ancient Near Eastern cultures. Essentially, they thought of gods as being like people, particularly being like kings, for the most part, or other people in some ways.

And they had a certain kind of special power. We might call it mana, to use the kind of anthropological term. In Egypt, they spoke of gods possessing heka, which is the word that is also used in Egyptian for magic.

So the more heka you had, the more powerful you were as a god. OK? So yeah, Egyptians conceived of their gods as both human and zoomorphic, zoomorphic meaning gods that look like animals. They had this magical energy that imbued them.

So this is different. There are no zoomorphic gods in the Middle East. But in Egypt, almost all of the gods had a corresponding animal form.

And sometimes it was part animal and part person in some way or other. The attitudes of the gods toward human beings varied widely from one myth to another, from one culture to another. In some cultures, it seemed, if you read the ancient Babylonian myths coming from Sumer, which were then passed on and transformed in the passing on, the notion is that human beings were created initially to do the work that the gods didn't want to do.

And for the most part, as long as the humans didn't cause any trouble, the gods were willing to just ignore them. And the whole story of the Great Flood comes from the idea that the humans were making so much racket and causing so much trouble that the gods couldn't get to sleep at night. And so they decided to wipe all the humans out.

But then, after the Great Flood, according to the Babylonian sources, the humans performed a sacrifice. And the gods smelled the sweet savor of the sacrifice that the humans had performed and said, Hey, maybe humans aren't so bad. So the idea is that, in a sense, the humans managed to win the favor of the gods.

In other cases, we see that they understood that the gods had more of a paternal understanding toward humanity or even a maternal understanding. And in other cases, and in certain cases of certain gods, there was almost more of an animosity toward humanity. So a lot of different ideas.

Gods could place part of their essence into objects. And we're going to talk about that when we talk about the next commandment about the images. So typically, the gods of the ancient world were specialists.

And this is where my initial story comes back here. You look at different gods. And the Egyptians make it really easy because they have these pictures that depict what's going on here.

This is your green god. How do we know? Because he's got a stalk of grain sticking on top of his head. The storm god is depicted here with a lightning bolt in his hand.

The goddess of love and the goddess of war. For some reason, those two seem to go together in people's minds. The sun god, who's got the sun disk above his head.

The goddess of the home, the hearth, and, of course, of the internet is the goddess Bastet. And we've got the moon god here, who's got this crescent moon over his head. So, typically, each one of these has their own area or their own realm in which they work.

Very few of the gods were viewed as being the overarching power that controlled everything. Marduk came pretty close sometimes. And there are some poems about Marduk.

He was the chief storm god of the Babylonians. But a little bit later, in some of their poetry about Marduk, they describe Marduk as having all these various powers over all the different realms and so on. But for the most part, the gods stayed in their lanes.

So if you wanted to have a successful harvest, you didn't pray to the war god. You prayed to the god of the rains or the god of the fields. If you wanted to have a child, you would pray to the god who was the patron of childbirth.

You went to the specialists. And all those different specialists were good in their area. And so you made sure that at various times, you gave them all lip service.

But at those special times in your life, you would go to a particular deity that you would need and want for your help. So, in addition to the big gods, and oftentimes these are the national gods I'm talking about here, like Marduk is the patron god of Babylon for the most part. And you've got El and Baal.

That whole thing is a little complicated. But you've got El, who is like the patron major father figure god of the Syrians, and then Baal, who's the young storm god kind of guy who becomes sort of displaces him in a way. But some of the creatures that we would think of as more like devils or demons or even imps were sometimes called gods in ancient texts.

This guy here, this is Bez. And he was a fertility type deity from Egypt. And he was pictured as being sort of like a dwarf.

And yet he was worshipped as a god and patron of childbirth. Individuals or families oftentimes would have personal gods who would intercede for them. And you might think of these as being kind of like saints, because we do have prayers to some of these personal gods, where you would ask the personal god to go intercede for you, to the big god.

I don't really want to bother Baal, but I will talk to my personal god, and my personal god will go in and take a message to Baal for me. OK? And these gods were represented with images. In Hebrew, we have these things called teraphim.

This is another one of those words that nobody really knows where it comes from or what it means. Rabbis try to claim it came from a word that meant something like despised or abominable or something. No basis for that at all.

So yeah, really, the word is a mystery. But oftentimes it gets translated in our Bible simply as images, sometimes it's left as teraphim. But this man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and teraphim and installed one of his sons, who became his priest.

Teraphim, by the way, this is the Hebrew plural form, but it typically seems to be meant as a singular. And this is a singular. This is very much like the word elohim.

You know, the word *elohim* means God in Hebrew. It's a Hebrew plural form, and that's what we call a portal of majesty or might or power. When you're thinking of something as particularly powerful, sometimes you use the plural form.

And that seems to be the case here with *teraphim* as well, because very frequently the word is used where it's clearly referring to a single object. But Micah in the book of Judges has an ephod, a divination tool of some sort, and he has a *teraphim*, a goddess, a personal God, in his shrine out back. Now this guy, of course, is an Israelite.

He is a good Jewish boy, but that's an anachronism. But he's a good Israelite boy and worships the Lord, but he also has his personal God in his own personal shrine. Michal, who is Michal? She was the wife of King David.

Well, not King David at this point, but the wife of David, daughter of King Saul. Michal took the *teraphim*, and she put it in the bed. This is when Saul was trying to kill David, and David found out about it.

And so David was going to be snuck out of the city, and in order to throw Saul off the track, they told Saul that David was sick. And what she did was she took the *teraphim*, the household idol, put it in the bed, and put the blankets up around it so that it would look like there was somebody in the bed. If that sounds silly, it is, and I believe it was meant to sound silly.

But at any rate, it's like, OK, we've got a God, and we're just going to put him in the bed here and pretend like he's David. Yeah. For the *teraphim* utter nonsense.

The diviner sees lies. The dreamers tell false dreams and give empty consolation, according to the book of Zechariah. So these things were used for a long time in Israel, and they were definitely considered to be basically minor gods.

And in fact, in the story of Rachel, and when she's fleeing from her father Laban, she takes the *teraphim* with her and puts it on the ground and sits on it. And when Laban catches up with them, he says, Why have you taken my gods? So clearly, the idea was that the idol, the *teraphim*, was associated with divinity, with the God. So, how is Israel's God different from some of these other gods of the ancient Near East? Well, first of all, in the time of Moses, probably the popular conception of God was sort of similar to that of the neighbors.

Let's face it, these people were ignorant. At this point, they do not know a whole lot about their God. They're going to be learning.

They're going to be learning a lot. But at this point, they're probably thinking of God as one God out of many. And here, this God has the audacity to tell them, you can't worship anybody else.

OK, Yahweh, what's your specialty? What is it that you're particularly good at? That would have been a normal question for them to ask, I would think, in those kind of circumstances. They clearly conceived of God as having a human form, whether they conceived of God as being human. I don't believe that's the case.

But they thought of God in very human terms. God had hands. God had a head.

God had a backside, to say, you know. Remember the story where Moses asks to see God's face. And God says, No, you can't see my face.

But I tell you what I'll do. I'll put you in a cleft of a rock. I'll put my hand over the cleft of the rock.

I will walk past. And after I walk past, I'll take my hand away. And you can see my backside as I go past.

And so, yeah, that story clearly implies a very human kind of God, just a very big human kind of God. Yahweh was Israel's God. Yeah, once they make that covenant, it is a relationship that implies that Yahweh is their special God, and he is their special people.

Much like Marduk was the god of Babylon, much like Athena was the patron goddess of the city of Athens, they believed that Yahweh was their god. Did they believe that there were no other gods? That's a big question, you know? We don't know when they really came to that conclusion. So, Yahweh might have been popularly identified as a god of war.

And we can know this because he is very frequently in the Old Testament called man of war. He is frequently called Yahweh Sabaoth. Sabaoth means armies.

So Yahweh is the god of the armies, god of the hosts. He's called the one who rides upon the clouds. So that seems to imply that he might be like a storm god, you know? What did they think about Yahweh? Well, who knows? You can be pretty sure it wasn't the way that we modern people, and modern theologians in particular, think about God.

Yeah. Several Bible passages talk about a divine council. And I think the most interesting passage here and depiction we have of this comes at the beginning of the Book of Job, where the Lord is meeting with the sons of God.



What does the sons of God mean? Apparently, it means a divine council, a group. And it sounds very much when you read it like a board meeting. He's getting reports from all the different sons of God.

And he gets a report also from the satan, the adversary, who tells him that he's been going all over the world and saying who's trustworthy and who's not. But that's only one passage. I mean, there are other passages.

In the Book of Psalms, we're told that the Lord takes his stand among the Elohim, the gods. We have other passages which speak about the divine beings and so on. So there were several places in the Old Testament that seem to speak of a plurality of divinities.

The Lord is being, of course, above all of those divinities, but not denying the possibility of other divine beings existing. I really do think that there was a sense among the Israelites in this early period, at least, and maybe a little bit later, that any spirit could, in a sense, be a god. They didn't make a lot of distinctions between gods and demons, for instance.

They didn't make a lot of distinction between even gods and angels. There was a general sense in the ancient Near East that spirit beings were divine. And so there is a lot of cloudiness and a lot of confusion at this early period, it seems to me.

Who is like you, O Lord, O Yahweh, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders? Exodus 15.11. So here Yahweh is spoken of as being above any of the other gods, but not necessarily denying their existence. And the Lord executed judgments even against their gods in Numbers 33.4. Does that mean there are other gods? Well, here we go. Psalm 82.

God has taken his place in the divine council. In the midst of the gods, he holds judgment. So a number of these passages would seem to imply a plurality.

What are some of the differences between the Lord and the gods of the nations around them at this point? Well, we have no official theogony. Now, when I talk about official theogony, and theogony, of course, is a story of the origin of a god. Where do the gods come from? Well, most of the gods had stories depicting their beginnings.

No such story exists about Yahweh. Or if it did, the Bible rejected it. It was never included in the Bible.

So while the people of Babylon, or of Assyria, let's say, could talk about how Baal had displaced El and had become the king of the gods, no such story was preserved in the Bible. Again, maybe they had stories about why and how Yahweh had become the

head of the divine council, but the Bible rejected those stories. They did not become a part of the official revealed truth that's found in the scriptures.

Yahweh is understood to be the creator and sustainer of all things. When did this idea come into the Israelite religion? Well, we can't really be sure, but it's clear that, unlike say, Baal, Yahweh is understood to be the one who brought not only Jerusalem or Israel into existence, but also all things into existence. And there were some parallels to some of these things in some of the Egyptian gods and so on, but not to the same extent as we find in Israel in their understanding of Yahweh.

And then there's the ethics part. You read the Greek myths, the stories about their gods and the way their gods behave, and the same thing for the Romans, who would basically take the Greek myths and run with them. You read those myths, and it seemed like the gods really acted pretty nastily a lot of the time.

I mean, they commit murder, they commit adultery, they lie to each other, they treat human beings like dirt, they commit rape, and yet, when the people needed justice, they would go to the gods and demand that the gods give them justice. But the gods themselves were unjust, you know? And you can see some of the same kind of ideas among the people of the Middle East, that they did not believe that their gods modeled morality. And this is clearly a little bit different in the Old Testament.

God tells the people of Israel, You are to be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy. Now, holy doesn't necessarily mean moral, but it does have some kind of ethical connotations because after saying that, then the Lord goes out and lays out a bunch of his laws and propositions and so on, some of the regulations that he has. So, in a sense, God bases his people's ethics on his own ethics.

And he expects his people to try to live up to standards, not only that he demands of them, but also that he models for them. Now, let's look at this commandment. You shall have no other gods before me.

One of the questions that a lot of people raise regarding this is What does this phrase before me mean? You know? Before me, the Hebrews, you know, just lifni, can have a lot of different kinds of possibilities. It can mean prior to, it can mean with precedence, over, or in my presence. So, we could say, you shall have no other gods prior to having me.

So, in other words, give me my due first, and then you can worship whatever you want. You shall have no other gods who have the same kind of status that I've got. It's another possibility.

Or we can understand it as meaning you shall have no other gods in my presence. Well, what's the presence of the Lord? Probably the understanding of Israel at that

time is that the presence of the Lord is wherever God's people are. Wherever God is present among his people, there are to be no other gods.

So, Israel is being told there are to be no other gods in Israel. I think that the rest of the Pentateuch, as well as the prophets, make it clear that the understanding of the first commandment for Israel is to worship one and only one God. So before me, I believe, even though it's ambiguous in its immediate context, in its greater context, it's pretty clear what's going on here.

It is a prohibition of worshipping other gods. The nations can walk each in the light of their own gods, but we shall walk in the light of the Lord our God forever. We shall have but one God.

We don't care what the nations are doing. We have one God, one God alone. So is that monotheism, or is it something different? Henotheism.

Henotheism is the idea that you have only one God at a time. Monotheism is the idea that there is only one God. No other gods exist.

Henotheism says, well, there might be other gods, but you only worship one. And as I said, either one of these is pretty much unheard of in the ancient world. Nobody just worshiped one God.

You had lots of gods. Everybody had lots of gods. Frequently, there is one main god, but everybody's got a lot of other gods as well.

My sense is that here, again, the idea of monotheism, the idea that the Israelites believed that only one God existed, we don't see this anywhere else in the ancient Near East. And really, some of the first hints of what we might call monotheism come in around 500 BC. Now, there is this question about the period in Egypt where we have the heretic king Akhenaten, who forbade anyone to worship anyone but the sun disk.

But what's going on there isn't really what we'd call monotheism, because it wasn't so much the idea that no other gods existed, because he himself considered the pharaoh to be God. You know? So he's, and that whole period is a little bit shady, because the later generations tried to destroy all the evidence about it. So finding a lot of information about what exactly was going on in those times is difficult.

But most scholars of Egyptian religion would not call the religion of Akhenaten monotheism. So what we do know is that in the later prophets, and we'll talk about this maybe a little bit later, but in some of the later prophets are clear statements that deny the existence of any other gods. So, the time when the first commandment was given back in the days of Moses, Israel is called to be henotheistic.

They are to worship only one God. Are there other possible gods? Maybe, but we're not going to worship them. We're only going to worship the Lord, and he alone is to be our God.

So the prophets proclaim Israel is to worship only the Lord, and yet Israel and Judah are constantly drawn to worship other deities. And that is really the whole crux of the issue. And this is really kind of heartbreaking as you look into it.

And the evidence has gone back and forth. At one point, it was argued that, well, the prophets were exaggerating. There really wasn't that much idolatry in Israel.

And I've seen that argument made by some really well-respected scholars. But more recently, archaeology seems to be supporting the prophets. We are seeing some evidence that there was indeed quite a bit of polytheism, the worship of other gods, in Israel.

So eventually, the prophets do come to proclaim there is one and only one God. Look at Isaiah 44.6. This is what the Lord says, Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty, I am the first, and I am the last, apart from me there is no other God. That seems like a pretty solid statement there of what we would call monotheism.

And if that were the only thing, if that were the only statement that we'd find, then we might say, well, maybe it was just using hyperbole or something or a figure of speech. But no, you go through the book of Isaiah, and he makes this argument in the later portions of Isaiah over and over again that there is but one God. And later on, we will find in the last of the prophets that that's just assumed.

So Israel's vow, based on what we see, I am the Lord your God who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. And we can kind of see an implied therefore. Therefore, you shall have no other gods before me.

I can make this requirement of you because of what I have done for you. Because I have put my, because I have brought about this benefit, I have shown you what I can do. I've shown you how I can beat the gods of Egypt.

You should trust in me and me only. So, what we can say is, no, you cannot have them all. You do not get the baker and the businessman and the musician and the doctor and so on and so forth.

You cannot have all these different gods. No, you must choose one and only one God. And that God is the Lord who is going to be your jack of all trades.

So yeah, we, if we've got a big problem, typically in our day, we're going to go to a specialist with it, right? But the Lord is telling Israel, I am not only your generalist, I am also your specialist. If you want your crops to grow, you come to me. If you wanna win your battles, you come to me.

If you want your wife to survive childbirth, come to me. And this was revolutionary. This is unlike any other kingdom that existed at that time.

Okay? So in the context of the Bible, this particular commandment is a biggie, you know? In fact, I would say it is the biggest of the biggies. Archaeological and biblical evidence indicate that Israel generally worshiped Yahweh as the primary, at times only, God. That much is clear.

And one of the ways we know this is if you look at names in the Bible, okay? And names have what we call a theophoric element. You know, the theophoric element is a reference to the God. So you have a name like, say, I don't know, Jeremiah, or a name, the Yah at the end is what we call the theophoric element that is a reference to Yahweh.

Or Yeshayahu, you know, Yahu at the end, that is a reference to the Lord. So, you look at the names, the vast majority of the names in the Bible have theophoric elements that refer to Yahweh. And some of them have theophoric elements that refer to God like Daniel, the God, my judge.

Very few names in the Old Testament have theophoric elements that refer to other gods like Baal, very few. They do pop up occasionally, you know? But they're very rare. So the evidence seems to be from the Bible that typically the people were faithful to worshiping the Lord and the Lord alone, okay? But no commandment receives more attention in explanations for Israel's failures than does this first commandment.

Why does Israel go into exile? Why are they defeated by their enemies? It's because they're not worshiping the Lord exclusively. It's because they're worshiping all these other gods. Ezekiel makes this marvelous image where he has this vision of what's going on in Jerusalem.

He's been carried off to Babylon, and he's sitting in Babylon having all these weird visions. But one of the things that's happening to him is God's taking him back in the spirit to Jerusalem, and he gets to see what's going on in the temple, and he gets to see that the people are worshiping Egyptian gods there in the temple. They're bowing down and worshiping the rising sun.

So, and the Lord says to him, this is the kind of thing that's going to get your nation destroyed. They're worshiping other gods and that is the biggest of the biggies, the

biggest reason why God is angry with his people, yeah? The key to understanding what we would call really the crux of the Old Testament, the book of Deuteronomy is the Shema. You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your might.

A call to be adhering to that covenant and that covenant alone. If you're loving the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being and your melodeca, which is usually translated strength or might or something like that, which basically means everything else you got. There's no room for worshiping any other gods.

Everything is going to the Lord. So there is no place on the basis of the Shema for having polytheism of worship of multiple gods. Violating the first commandment is at the heart of all of Israel's failures.

Why are they acting badly? It's because they're not worshiping the Lord. This is an interesting point, taking this kind of thing up into the New Testament. Paul makes a very interesting observation in Romans chapter one, when Paul notes that it's because the Greeks particularly, he's picking on the Greeks here and the Romans, that because they have the wrong ideas about who God is, that they've exchanged the glory of God for animals and people and things of this sort.

Because they have wrong ideas about God, they're so immoral. Because God gives them up to a depraved mind, it's because of their theology being wrong that their behavior follows.

And the same thing is true with Israel. The Israelites, the Jews, people of Judah, later are condemned and judged by God for all kinds of sins, but basically it comes down to the fact that they are not remaining true to the Lord. And they're rejecting his goodness, his love.

First Kings nine, six through nine, if you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I set before you, but go serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut Israel off from the land that I've given them and the house that I've consecrated them. And for my name, I will cast it out of my sight. No, here, it doesn't say if they're murdering people.

It doesn't say if they're committing adultery. It doesn't say if they're stealing. It says, if they go and serve other gods, then I will cut them off, okay? This house will become a heap of ruins, and everybody will be astonished.

And they say, Why has the Lord done such a thing to this land and this house? And they'll be able to say, it's because they abandoned the Lord, their God. This is the root of all of their troubles is the failure to keep the first commandment. So failure to

be true to the Lord is the major theme of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and most of the other prophets as well, with a few exceptions.

The infatuation with foreign gods probably fizzled in Israel during the time of the Babylonian exile. Why can we say this? Because when you get to the post-exilic prophets, they're no longer harping on this theme. It doesn't seem to be the issue anymore.

Once Israel has been through the ringer, has gone through exile, and then returned home again, their infatuation with foreign gods largely ends. You see this in the book of Chronicles, for instance. It doesn't ignore the problem of apostasy, but it very much downplays it.

And the books of Kings, there are repeated references to the failures of Israel's kings to be true to the Lord. Solomon is picked on for all of his pagan gods and so on. You read in the book of Chronicles that they don't even mention it.

They just pass it over. Why? Because it's not really a problem anymore. They don't have to worry about that at this point.

Ezra and Nehemiah acknowledge that intermarriage was a possible problem that could lead to apostasy, but they don't seem to see apostasy as an issue in their day. Haggai and Zechariah focus on the restoration of the cult. Malachi focuses on cultic and social issues, but shows no concern about the fact that Israel is worshiping pagan gods at that point, because apparently they weren't.

Now, on the other hand, outside of the land of Israel, where we've got Jews scattered in other places, there is evidence that the Jews were not quite so faithful to the Lord as they were apparently in the land of Israel. We have the Amarna letters from the Egyptian Empire, from the Israelite colony in Egypt.

And we see a good deal of evidence there, what we call syncretism of the worship of other gods along with the Lord. We see, even in the book of Esther, that we have two heroes, Esther and Mordecai, who both have names that are based upon those of pagan gods. Esther, based on the name of the goddess Ishtar, and Mordecai's name comes from Marduk.

So we have issues apparently outside the land where people are not quite so careful about maintaining those boundaries. But within Israel, it seems that they have got their act together. There was a brief flirtation with syncretism during the intertestamental period.

And this kind of sets off that whole Antiochian revolt thing that we had happen in 164 BC. But essentially, what the book of Maccabees tells us is that some of the

people of the land in Jerusalem decided that it would go better for them if they would start worshiping the Lord of heaven as all the other nations did around them. Everybody was starting to identify their chief gods with Zeus, Zeus Uranus.

And so there were people within Jerusalem who were saying, hey, we should get on board this too, because there were certain tax benefits to be had if they were to identify the Lord with Zeus. That's another story. But at any rate, there was a brief flirtation with that.

I crammed a syncretistic religion, which says we're all just worshiping the same God with different names. But yeah, that didn't last very long. What about the New Testament? Do we see the first commandment in the New Testament? Actually, the first commandment is never quoted in the New Testament.

Interesting. But we do have its positive formulation, which is the Shema, called the greatest commandment by Jesus. Jesus says, What is the greatest commandment? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind.

That is basically the first commandment in a positive form. So Jesus says that's where it all begins. That is the greatest commandment.

And Paul states pagan gods are nothing. At one point, he says in 1 Corinthians, " we know pagan gods don't even exist. In 1 Corinthians 10, he says, Well, pagan gods are demons.

Make up your mind, Paul. Anyway, he urges Christians not to participate in the worship of pagan gods, which seems to be a wise course of action. You know, you're dealing with people here who are new to this Christianity stuff and this one God stuff.

So he's trying to get the message across to them. But in the world of the New Testament and in the world of the early church, even though obviously there are pagan gods, the whole religion system going on in the world in that time is kind of funky because you still have remnants of old paganism, worship of the old Greek and Roman gods and so on. And you have things like the Mithras cult, and you have other pagan religions that are popping up all over the place that worship a variety of gods.

Then you've got the state cult, you know, the worship of the spirit of Rome kind of thing. But for the most part, Christians were very true to the understanding that they were to worship one God and one God only. And many were willing to give their lives rather than violate that commandment.

Okay, so let's bring this kind of home here now. What does this mean to me? We don't live in the world of ancient Rome. We don't live in the world of ancient Israel.



We live in modern America. And, you know, in some ways, there's a kind of weird kind of creepiness of that we are beginning to become more like ancient Rome in its way, because there are a whole lot of different religions out here in our society. It has been estimated that there are more Buddhists in our country now than Episcopalians.

Now, the fastest growing religious group in our country is the group that identifies itself as none of the above, you know, when they put the check in. When I wrote my book 30 years ago, I can say that over 80% of Americans claimed to be Christians. Most recent survey, 63% of Americans claim to be Christians.

We have growing groups of Muslims. We have growing groups of Buddhists. We have Hindus, not as many, but we have a variety of religions that are out there.

And in a society like ours, that's okay. We've got to recognize the fact that God has not given us a mandate to purge our society of pagan gods. He's given us a mandate to purge our hearts of pagan gods, not our society of pagan gods.

Paul never tried to get a petition going to remove the statues of the emperor from Jerusalem or anything of that sort. The idea of using political force to try to Christianize the country, that's something that comes in a little bit later and seemed to have been a major mistake, a major misstep by Christianity and by the church. So yeah, we should recognize, okay, there are other religions out there and we need to be tolerant of those things, but we also have to recognize that no, not all religions are worshipping the same God.

And we have heard it. We have heard it from our presidents, in fact, of the United States, saying, well, you know, we all just worship the same God just by different names, baloney, that's not true. You know, the attributes of the gods are different.

The conceptions of the gods are different. We have a variety of understandings of who God is, and gods are not approached in the same way. They're not worshiped the same way.

So what does this mean for us? Well, you know, when it comes to ecumenism, ecumenical actions, and so on, cooperation, there are lots of different kinds of Christians out here, and we differ in our externals, but for the most part, we agree on who God is. We have some differences of opinion on some minor things, but for the most part, we are all in agreement that we worship one and the same God. And so there is really no problem with me going to the Episcopal church or the Lutheran church or the Baptist church or the Presbyterian church and even, you know, groups like the Seventh-day Adventists and sharing in worship with them because the fact is we are all on the same page about who God is.

And even if I don't like what's happening up behind the altar table, or I disagree with the idea of limited access to the communion or something of this sort, we can still agree on the basics about who the Lord is. But when it comes to worshiping at, say, a Buddhist shrine or a Shinto tea festival or something of this sort, I think that there is a place there for us to act with restraint because they are not worshiping the same God that we do. I think we can go to a Buddhist temple and be humble guests.

I think that we can learn, not only learn about our neighbors, but also about our neighbors' religious beliefs, and maybe even learn a little bit about our own relationship with God, through the study of other religions. But participating in the religious rituals of other cultures, I think, is where we need to draw the line.

Will God strike us dead? Obviously not, you know? But I do think that we run the risk of violating the first commandment by doing so. Now let's get a little more spiritual here. Let's go back to understanding what we mean by a God.

A God is one to whom we ascribe power. That's the basic root meaning of the word God, which is a mighty, powerful one. Martin Luther said, Whatever your heart clings to and relies on, that is your god.

I love that. That is just a wonderful understanding of how we relate to God. And Martin Luther is dead on here.

You know, a lot of people say that your God is that which you love the most. I disagree with that. I really think that Martin Luther has it right here.

It's that which you cling to, that which you rely on, that which you trust in. That is what your God really is. And we know that in our society, there are a lot of different things that people will rely upon or think about or lean on, things that can become our gods.

There are those people who are expecting the aliens to save them, you know, who are hoping for the little gray men to come and fix all of this mess that we've got. There, of course, is the almighty dollar, which we call the almighty dollar for a reason. And there are those people who seem to have a godlike faith in the government.

And all of those things are idols. They're all fake gods. And any of those things that we cling to and we rely upon other than the Lord, any of those things that we expect to be meeting our needs other than God are, I believe, violations of this commandment.

Science, of course, is a big one in our day and age. There are many people who are expecting science to solve all of our problems, you know? And think that one day, all of the issues that we have, issues of hunger, issues of injustice, can be solved by scientific inquiry. I love science.

I'm a science nerd, but that's not science's place. We cannot cling to it and rely upon it. And, of course, there are people who depend upon other people.

We call them codependents, people who cling to others and essentially make those people their god and expect those people to meet all their needs. Nobody can be in that place to meet all of our needs. Nobody has that kind of power.

Nobody has that kind of authority. Nobody has that kind of reach and ability to generalize and to meet so many different needs. Only the Lord can do that.

And so, you know, this is the question that we have to ask ourselves. What is it really that we are clinging to? What is it really that we are relying upon? Who is it that we have made our god? And that is the challenge, even today, for us, of the first commandment. Jesus told us, love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, with all your being, you know? And that doesn't leave room for other gods and other powers in our lives to take his place.

This is Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino and his teaching on the Ten Commandments. This is session 2, Commandment 1: No other gods.