

The First Commandment

A Lecture Delivered by Mr. Bryan on Various Occasions

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me;" reads the first of the commandments brought down from Sinai. The fact that it stands first would indicate that it is the most important of the ten, and the same conclusion is reached if we compare it with the other nine. But in presenting a proposition of such great importance it is well to support it with the best possible authority. In this case we are able to invoke the testimony given by One "who spake as never man spake." In the 22nd chapter of Matthew, beginning at the 35th verse, you will find the question asked and answered. "Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law?"

You will notice that the question was asked by a lawyer and that the lawyer asked it for the purpose of tempting Christ. It is not the first time, nor the last, that a lawyer has set a trap in vain; and it is not the only time a lawyer has done good without intending it.

In saying this I do not mean to reflect upon lawyers; I simply state the fact. There is a popular prejudice against lawyers. I found it necessary to leave out of one of my lectures a complimentary mention of lawyers because it made the audience laugh during a serious part of the address. Finding that I was compelled to insist each time upon the sincerity of the compliment, I finally omitted it. I do not share this feeling. My father was a lawyer and no better man ever lived. My ambition to be a lawyer was formed so early that I can not remember when I began to look forward to a career in this profession. I studied law, was admitted to the bar and practiced until I was drawn away from law into politics, and my only son is a lawyer. I am thus thrice bound to respect the profession. With this disclaimer of prejudice I repeat that the lawyer selected by the Pharisees to embarrass the Savior was not the first or only one to fall in such an attempt, and he was not the only one who, by addressing an improper question addressed to the Saviour, brought out a great truth. You will remember that the question was raised as to which of the disciples would be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. We are ashamed to think that those in the very presence of the Master could have thought of anything so selfish, and yet we are glad that the question was asked because it gave Christ an opportunity to announce the most revolutionary doctrine that this world has ever heard.

Man had been prone to measure his greatness by THE SERVICES WHICH HE COULD COMMAND FROM OTHERS but Christ taught that greatness is to be measured by THE SERVICE RENDERED TO OTHERS. This is the growing philosophy. The progress of nations, like the progress of individuals, can be measured by the extent to which this doctrine is applied in life.

In like manner, Christ's answer to the lawyer sets the seal of his approval upon the first commandment and establishes a great truth. In verses 37 to 40, Jesus said unto him, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Some have put the emphasis upon humanity as if the second commandment were more important than the first. I remember that Tolstoy called attention to this error during the day which it was my privilege to spend with him at his Russian home. He insisted that the first commandment was the most important because man can not understand his relation to his brother until he is first brought into harmony with the Heavenly Father.

Christ takes the ten commandments and condenses them into two. Out of the commandments that relate to man's duty to God He brings forth the one supreme commandment that includes all the others, namely, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,

and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." And out of the commandments that relate to man's duty to his fellow men he brings forth a second commandment worthy to be a companion to the first, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

Here is the whole law—all that man needs to understand his duty toward God and his duty toward his brother, but the first is the GREAT commandment.

My purpose in calling your attention to this commandment is to show you that it is as much needed today as when it was given to the Children of Israel, although our temptations are quite different from those which they had to meet. When the first commandment was announced its immediate purpose seems to have been to warn a chosen people against the worship of idols: today it comes to us with equal force as a warning against the worship of false gods which man is tempted to put between himself and Jehovah in this age.

I desire to bring before you nine of these false gods; not all the false gods, by any means, but nine that are representative. I might carry with me a little cabinet with three shelves and exhibit these gods before you in so far as they could be represented to the eye—three on the top shelf, three on the middle shelf, and three on the bottom shelf. But it may be better not to exhibit them. You might pick out your own false god, if you have any, and proceed while I talked about the others. It may be better to introduce them to you one at a time, and I will ask you to consider each of these false gods as I present it and then, when I am through with it, go on with me to the next.

I have arranged them in three classes because they are of different grades. I put three in the first class case because, in the worship of them, good is sometimes done incidentally, even if unintentionally. The three in the second class are not of so high an order; those who worship these three do no good even unintentionally. In the third class I put three of a still lower order, three the worship of which destroys.

The first of the gods in the first class is the God of Gold; its patrons worship money. It is put in the first class because those who worship money are generally industrious, and their industry sometimes brings substantial benefit to the world. Those who worship money may be intelligent also: a man may secure an education with no higher purpose than the making of money, and his intelligence may incidentally aid others. It is difficult if not impossible for one to monopolize the results of his industry or intelligence. Then, too, the worshipers of money may be wise enough to know that integrity is an aid to accumulation, and their integrity may indirectly benefit society.

But the God of Gold is a false god and is sure to lead one astray. The worship of it shrivels the soul and, in the end, the love of money is quite sure to make man ignore the distinction between right and wrong and lead him to the employment of methods which are indefensible before the bar of conscience, even if they do not actually violate statute law.

The second god in the first class is the God of Fashion: it is worshiped by those who put social prominence above all other things. Its worship, too, may incidentally bring good to society. Man is a social creature: he needs to mingle with his fellows, but it is a false god and it leads to the putting of undue emphasis upon the social side of life and often creates unreasonable distinctions. This god leads those who worship it to neglect the higher and more important things of life.

The third god in the first class is the God of Fame. The statesman's god, or if you prefer it, the politician's god. I put this god in the first class because its worshipers, also, often render a service to society without intending it. The candidate for office is frequently a for criticism, but how would we keep the man in office under control but for the men who are seeking offices. It is well for society that there

are those ready and anxious to hold office. Their very eagerness and watchfulness adds to the security of the public.

And then, too, the man who is looking for an office is willing to work. When told that this man or that man has his eye on an office—my answer is, do not disturb him. As long as he is looking for an office he will be untiring in his industry and we need his aid. It requires an enormous amount of time and labor to secure any great reform. I do not know what we would do for workers if it were not for men with aspirations. So many citizens, actuated by selfish reasons, do nothing that their indifference must be offset for the present by the activities of some who are prompted by selfish ambition. And, in a country like ours, the intelligent man may learn that honest service rendered to the people is the surest road to preferment, and so may conscientiously endeavor to give expression to the will of the people, even though his motives are purely selfish.

But the God of Fame is a false god and one who has no higher purpose than love of fame is certain to be led astray. He will in time become so absorbed in worship of this god that he will resort to cunning or even fraud to secure position.

These are the gods of the first class. Any one of them might furnish us a theme for an evening, but I can only spare a moment for each, leaving you to elaborate the suggestions made. Any incidental good that may come to society from the worship of any of these gods will come in larger measure from the worship of the true God.

And now let us consider the three gods on the second shelf, the gods whose worship makes one worthless to himself and to society. They are of a lower order than the three gods already named because those who worship them do not render a service even unintentionally.

The first of the second three is the God of Ease—the god worshiped by those who are devoted to the body and desire nothing higher than comfort. They want food and clothing and shelter and ask to be let alone while they enjoy them. They eat, not because it is necessary to the body but because they like to eat. They sleep, not because the body needs rest and recuperation but because they like to sleep. They eat and eat and eat; they sleep and sleep and sleep: then they rise to eat and eat again. They are worthless to themselves and worthless to society. They are the barren fig tree; they encumber the earth; they attach themselves to nothing good while they live and they pass away without giving a pang of pain.

The second god in the second class is the God of Intellect, the god worshiped by those who exalt the mind—who think, not with a purpose, but merely for the pleasure of thinking. I know that in putting the Intellectual god upon the same level with the God of Ease I shall meet with some dissent, but it is so long since I have said anything which met with everybody's approval that a little opposition does not embarrass me. While the mind performs a higher function than the body, still those who worship the mind disobey the first commandment as surely as those who worship the body. The mind is the servant of man just as the body is the servant. Would you have proof of it? There is something in man that is superior to both body and mind—it is the soul of man that is supreme. That which can hold the body in the flames until the flames consume the quivering flesh is the real master, and the soul can do this. The soul can do even more, it can take the mind, purge it of its vanity and egotism, and fill it with humility and make it the servant of mankind; the soul that can do this is master of the mind.

There are intellectual temptations as well as physical temptations. It is the mind that disputes with the heart sovereignty over the individual, and it is death to faith and hope and life when the brain triumphs over the spiritual in man. The struggle between the mind and the heart began in the Garden of Eden—it still continues and real success hangs upon the issue. Pascal declares that the heart has its reasons which the mind can not understand because the heart is of an infinitely higher order. History proves that the intellect can not be relied upon to regenerate the life or to strengthen one to withstand the temptations which de-