

## THE COMMANDMENTS



### 1 GOD'S DECISION

#### THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods.

*What does this mean for us?*

We are to fear, love, and trust God above anything else.

**G**od has made a decision about you. God hasn't waited to find out how sincere you are, how devout or religious you might be, or how well you understand the Bible and the Catechism. God hasn't even waited to find out if you are interested or willing to take this decision seriously. God has simply decided.

God made this decision knowing full well the kind of person you are. God knows you better than anyone else could—inside out, upside down, and backwards. God knows where you are strong and where you are weak, what you are most proud of and what you would most like to hide. Be that as it may, God's decision is made.

God comes straight out with it: "I am the Lord your God." This is the decision: God has decided to be your God. For God wants to be as close to you as your next breath, to be the one



who gives you confidence and value, to open a future to you in the freedom of the Word. God wants to be the one to whom you turn for whatever you need.

God has said this before, many times. God first announced this decision about you when you were baptized. "You," God said, as the pastor spoke your name, "are baptized in my name. I am your God and I will never let you go."

God has said it since your Baptism, too, speaking on the lips of those who have loved you, whether they were part of your family, a teacher, or one of your pastors. In fact, God is saying it again in these very words: "You, you the one who is reading this, I am your God. How do you like that?"

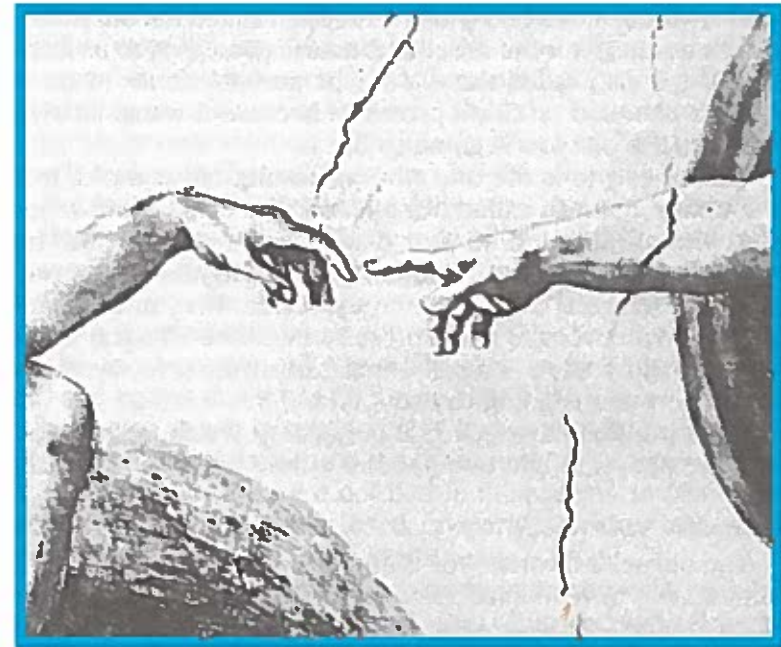
Maybe you would like to ask a different question: Who is this God, anyway?

It is the God who made you and everything that is, the God who raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead after he had been put to death on a cross, the one whose Spirit came like a mighty wind to drive home a word that gives forgiveness and hope. It is the God who called Abraham and Sarah out of the desert, the God who sent word to Mary that she would be having a baby, the God who covered the apostle Paul's eyes with scales and then opened his mouth with a word of freedom.

Maybe you've got another question then: What's in it for me? If God has made a decision for me, what do I get out of it?

To start with, life itself. God's decision is the life of you. For God is the one who has given you your mind, body, and all your powers, who has looked after you by night and cared for you by day, giving you all you need. The God who creates is the God of life. When this God says, "I am your God," you can expect this God to give you everything you need to live.

There's more. With God's decision, you receive the freedom of forgiveness. The God who has decided for you is the God who in Christ refuses to hold your past against you, no matter what shape it has had. The God we know in Jesus is the one who takes you as you are—with your strengths, gifts, talents, and abilities, and also with your bad habits, selfishness, pride, and whatever else you might want to conceal. There are no strings on God's decision and so no strings on you, either. You're free.



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Still there's more. The God who has decided for you is the one who opened the grave the first Easter morning, the God who raises the dead. So when this God says, "I am your God," the *am* stands forever. God is, was, and always will be your God. So no grave will ever be able to hold you. In the silence of death, you will hear Jesus' voice saying, "Rise and shine. I am the Lord your God." God's decision opens your future.

Does it sound pretty good? God has decided to be your God; the God who has made this decision is the one who has created you, freed you, and assured you of the future. God's decision grants you life, forgiveness, and resurrection. You are free.

### *The two yous*

But wait. No matter how great and gracious God's decision is, there are two yous in you and one of your yous isn't going to like this promise—not a bit. It is the you born in each of us at birth, a selfish you who wants to go it alone. It is the one in you that always wants its own way, who insists that you don't



owe anything to anyone. This you is often called the *old Adam* or *Eve* because it is the rebellious nature passed on to us from them. It is also called the *old self* or the *old sinner* in us. It doesn't like God or God's promises because it wants its own control. The old you is going to die.

The other you is the one who makes the old you old. It is the new you, a you called out by God at your Baptism, when God first promised to be your God. It is the you who will be what God made you to be: a believer, a neighbor-lover, one who cares for the earth. Born in the water, this you lives and thrives on the word of God's promise in Christ. This you fights with the old you. As long as Christ has anything to say about it, the new you is going to live.

Does it make sense? Or is it confusing? Watch the old you and the new you fight one another a little bit and you'll see.

### *The old you*

The old self's favorite words are *me*, *myself*, and *I*. If the old sinner in us were to have a slogan, it would be "I would rather do it myself." That is what Adam and Eve told God in the Garden of Eden, as the book of Genesis tells the story. And that is the old Adam or Eve's trademark.

This is also why the old self—the old you in you—doesn't like God's decision and promise but hates it and treats it like poison. So whenever God's promise is spoken, the old self goes to work with a vengeance.

"So what," the old you says. "God can make all the decisions God wants to make, but I'm in charge here. There's nothing I can't handle. Just leave me alone. Gods are for the weak, those who can't make it on their own."

But most of the time, the old sinner in us is a lot more subtle. Instead of hitting the promise head-on, the old sinner feints and ducks, moving and weaving to avoid getting caught. "God's decision is a great thing," it says, "but God helps those who help themselves. There must be something we can do here. We're not just puppets, after all." Before too long, the old Adam or Eve has turned God's decision into your decision—a commitment, a promise, something you have to do before God can do anything with you.



The old self can get religion, too. "God has made a decision, alright," it might say, "but not for you—you are too much of a sinner" or "you haven't tried hard enough" or "you are always in trouble in one way or another." Then the old Adam or Eve suggests its own solution: "You just do what I say," it says, "and you'll look so religious God won't be able to resist you."

But for all its talk, the old you still knows that you can't make it alone. You have to have some help of one kind or another—someone to help you out when there's trouble, something that will make you feel good about yourself, something that you can put yourself into when you would like.

This is where the old you really starts to hit its stride. The old you knows that it has no future, that it can't make it alone. So it begins to run in counterfeits—things that give a sense of power or control or security but in the end can't deliver. These are called *idols*. They are not bad in themselves. In fact, they are generally good when used properly. But they turn bad when used for the old self's purposes.

Money is an example. There's nothing wrong with money; it is a good thing, a great thing. But when the old self gets hold of a dollar, something different happens. "If only I had a lot of it," the old sinner in us will say, "then I wouldn't have to worry about a thing. Everybody would like me. I would finally get the recognition I deserve. I could buy anything I want. And if I got into trouble, money would solve anything."

When this happens, money has turned into something different. Instead of being what we earn or spend to buy what we need and a few extras, money becomes a way of buying ourselves. It might buy some happiness, for a while anyway, but when money gets mixed up with love, it turns around and starts to spend you. Every waking moment has to be arranged around getting, saving, counting, protecting, and getting more money. God, the neighbors, and the earth don't count for anything; it is just the dollar, the almighty dollar that counts.

If money won't do, the old self has a number of other idols to offer. Some might be the old fashioned kind: tin gods, statues, ancestors, the sun, moon, or stars. But most of the time the old Adam or Eve is a lot more tricky, taking the best things we have—an attractive appearance, ability in sports, good marks,



a hobby, or a job—and turning them bad. When these things take hold of people's hearts, claiming fear, love, and trust, they become idols just like the statues ancient peoples worshiped.

People can be their own idols, too. That's the old self's favorite. The old sinner in us thinks we can do it all alone, all by ourselves. So it goes to work to make us fear, love, and trust our abilities and strength, manipulating within us a confidence that we can make it go without help or limit. So we get caught up in ourselves.

That's the old self's game. It is the old you in you and in each of us, a you who is bound to go it alone. God has decided to put this you to death. God won't be mocked or treated like a liar. God won't have the neighbors abused either. And God isn't going to let the earth become the old self's sewer. The old Adam or Eve will use itself to death.

### *The new you*

God likes to be God: to create, to forgive and raise the dead, to bestow faith. So when it comes to making something new, whether within us or beyond us, God gets possessive. "Look," God says, "I've had it with the old you's mess. I know there are a lot of things you can do to help me when you're ready, but when it comes to making things right between us, you just leave that to me. I'll make a new you out of you, a you after my own heart."

So the new you—the self born in God's decision for you, drawn out of the waters of Baptism and sustained by God's promise—has a different look about it, a new look. It is the you who fears, loves, and trusts God above anything else, the you God is creating anew.



Jean-Claude Lejeune



God is to be feared; that is for sure. If the thought of meeting a great athlete, a star musician, or a well-known politician makes you nervous, think of God turning to face you. You might never recover.

But the God who raised Jesus from the dead doesn't care for intimidation. Instead, God wants to be God, to do the things that only the real God can do. So God creates, making everything from the stars and their planets to the small worlds of a flower's head or a bug's ear. God delivers, saving people from disasters, freeing us from our own clutches. God gives hope to the despairing, trust to the fearful, and confidence to the broken. There is a new you in you, a tenderhearted you whom God will move to awe, to reverence. When the word takes hold of you, bringing forth this fear, you will really be able to say, "Awesome! That's incredible! How could God do it? It is too much for words."

God is after your love, too. Sometimes God can be funny, it's true, turning our expectations on their ear, doing things we don't like or can hardly stand. That must be what it is like to be God: to do things differently. But for all of this, God is after you—especially when you're a little out of sorts with something that God had done. God loves his enemies and wants to be loved in return. So God has become lovable, in Christ, becoming a child in him and then taking on all the powers that the old sinner in us and death itself could unleash against him. There's a new you in you meant for this love. By the time God gets done with you, you won't want to say anything else but this: "Be my God, my only God. I'll never have another; you are mine."

And God wants to be trusted. God wants to be the one you call out to in a time of trouble, the one to whom you turn when things are going bad. One of the things God enjoys the most about being God, at least going by the way God behaves most of the time, is turning evil into good. God likes to do this for you, too. So when you call out and say, "God help me," God says, "I'll be right there. You just wait. By the time I get done with this, it will be better than you ever dreamed possible." There's a new you in you that God is at work on right



now, a you who hollers, "God help me," in the sure and certain confidence that the good Lord is listening.

This is the new you: the you created to fear, love, and trust God above all things. It is the you who is a believer, the you God is crafting in you. If you want to do something for God, there will be plenty of opportunity. But when it comes to making this you, the new one, God says, "You just leave that to me. I'll take care of it myself."

So God speaks, announcing the decision that has been made for you. So God washes in the waters of Baptism. So God comes to the table at the Lord's Supper, gracing you once more in the Word, the eating and drinking. God has made a decision about you, to put the old you in you to its end and to bring forth the new one, the you who believes, the one in you who is identified with Christ.

### *Commands for the old you*

The old you doesn't give up very easily. When God finishes with you, the old you will be no more and the new you—the you who fears, loves, and trusts God—will not have to fight any longer. But in the meantime, there is some struggle left. The old you isn't going to give up until it has no alternative.

So for the meantime, while the old you hangs on and the new you awaits completion, God has some commandments to hand out. They are provisional, rules for the meantime. At the same time, there is something really good about them. For in these commandments, God gives us a sense of what is most important, what matters from day to day.

In lots of ways, the Commandments are like classroom rules. If everybody came to class because of love for the teacher and the studies, there wouldn't have to be any rules. Everybody would go about learning for the joy of it. As nice as it would be, that hasn't happened yet—at least not in most classrooms. So the teachers hand down some rules: No talking during class. Raise your hand before you speak. No food in the classroom.

The Commandments work the same way. The old self knows only one rule: Everyone for herself or himself and may the winner take all. When the sinner in us gets loose, no one is safe. If God didn't keep the old you in check, the world would



be even more of a mess than it is—filled with rebellion, contempt, murder, rape, and lies.

So God gives some commandments, handing them down to keep the world in order for the word of promise. The Commandments are given to keep the sinner in us under control until the word of God's decision for us takes hold and brings forth the new. God uses the Commandments to protect us and what is ours from the old self in our neighbors and in ourselves.

God uses the Commandments for another purpose, as well: to show the old self in us its true end in the promise. Here, too, the Commandments work like classroom rules. When a substitute teacher takes over, sometimes discipline is all that happens; the whole class starts to fall apart. But when classes are working the way they should work, the class stays in line and you can learn something. So God uses the Commandments to teach, to teach the old sinner in us its limits and to turn the new you toward the promise. As the promise takes hold, the Commandments quiet down; God's grace takes over.

Never one to miss an opportunity, the old self is ready to jump here. "Wait a minute," it says. "You've got that wrong. It works this way: If I do the Commandments, then God will give me the promises. I've got to have a part in this, too."

Can you see the trick? Once again, the old Adam or Eve in us comes on sounding as pious as a television preacher, concerned only about what is best for us. But there's something prickly in the piety, a thorn in the rose. If you have to do the Commandments to obtain the promise, God's decision for you isn't worth much. In fact, Christ was wasting his time. It's all up to you.

"But now just a minute, here," the old self protests. "Don't we have to do something? I mean don't we have to be sincere or at least want the promise or commit ourselves to the promise?"

It sounds good again, doesn't it? The old self wants more than anything else to hang on, even if it is just to a little tiny piece of the action. But God won't have it. "I've decided," God says. "If you want a little something to do, try the Commandments. In the meantime, I'm going to have some fun creating a new self that enjoys its freedom."



### *The whole sum*

That's the First Commandment. Luther once called it the whole sum of the law and the whole sum of the gospel. It sums up all the laws and commands of God because it requires the faith of the whole person—our fears, loves and trusts, our hearts, souls, minds, and strength. It is from this commandment that all the others follow.

At the same time, the First Commandment sums up the whole gospel. It is God's promise, the announcement of the decision that God has made for you and each of us in Christ. This is the promise Paul declares in Romans 8:31 when he asks, "If God is for us, who is against us?" Because God is for us, Paul goes on to say, nothing "in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

The First Commandment sums up the whole Catechism, too. For the Catechism is a little book of God's promises. The promises begin with this one, the most important promise of all, the one we receive in Christ's name. This promise is repeated in the Apostles' Creed, becomes the basis of our praying in the Lord's Prayer, and comes home once more in the sacraments and keys and confession.

At the same time, the Catechism is the story of death and birth: the death of the old you that fights and struggles against God, your neighbors, and the earth; the birth of the new you, born in the waters of Baptism and sustained in God's speaking. This is the new you God is making in you, the you who is a believer. As God makes you new, you will discover the freedom that God gives, the freedom that is given with the joy and certainty of God's promise.



### THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

#### What does this mean for us?

We are to fear and love God so that we do not use His name carelessly, or use it to curse, swear, lie, or deceive, but only on Him in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving.