



Opening Question:

Do you make daily "to do" lists? How effective are they?

Priorities. We all have them. We might know what our life's priorities are. But what about today's priorities? Many of us make lists. We can hand write them or type them into a phone app. Throughout the day, we glance at the list to measure our progress.

What about our spiritual priorities? Is there a list we can use to measure our spiritual and moral life? There is. We call it the Ten Commandments. Even in the time of Jesus, people used this list to measure their spiritual lives.

Once, a man ran up to Jesus, fell to his knees, and asked, "Perfect Teacher, what do I have to do so I can receive eternal life?"

"Why do you call me 'perfect?'" Jesus replied. "Only God is 'perfect.' You know God's commandments: Don't kill. Don't be unfaithful in marriage. Don't steal. Don't lie about others. Don't cheat. Honor your parents."

"But, teacher," the man said, "I've obeyed all these commandments since I was a young boy."

As he looked at the man, Jesus felt love for him and said, "There is something else you don't have. Leave here, sell everything you own, and give the money you earn to the poor. You will have treasure with God. Then, come and follow me."

The man became very sad because he was rich. So he left.

Mark 10:17-31

The man kept the other commandments but could not keep the most important one. A relationship with God comes first. It's the top priority.



Different Lists

Before we look into the first commandment, let's look over the commandments as a whole and talk about the ways different groups list them. There are three traditions for numbering the commandments.

First, there is the Jewish list which is based upon Mishnah rabbinical commentaries written in the fourth century AD. Then, there are two Christian lists. One is the Greek tradition based upon the Septuagint, an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament. It was used by the early Church in its missionary work and its worship. The Orthodox, Anglican and Calvinist traditions use this Greek list. There is also a Latin list from St. Augustine. Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions use this list.

Catholics direct the first three commandments towards God and the last seven towards others. They split the commandment on coveting in two. One focuses on marital relationships, the other on possessions.

The First Commandment

The first commandment and our top priority tell us about the place of God in our lives.

I am the Lord your God. You will not have any strange gods before Me.

The word "Lord" replaced the Hebrew name for God. Ancient Hebrew didn't include but assumed vowels in their documents. So, the name of God in the Scriptures consisted of four consonants YHWH. The name came from the scene of the burning bush. Moses asked God for his name.

God replied, I am who am.

Exodus 3:14a

Many people assume this phrase meant God merely existed. But modern scholars think it has a more dynamic meaning. "I am who am" really means "I am the one who created you" and "I am the one active in your life." Pious Jews wanted to honor the name so they replaced it with the word "Lord."

When we read the First Commandment in the Scriptures, it's the longest section of the Ten.

God addressed the people,

"I am the Lord your God, who freed you from slavery in Egypt.

You will have no other gods before me.

You will not make an idol for yourselves, nor an image of anything in the heavens above, in the earth below, or in the water under the earth. You will not bow down to them or serve them. I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God. I will punish the children of fathers who hate me, even to their third and the fourth generations. But I will show loving kindness to those who love me and keep my commandments even to thousands of generations."

Exodus 20:2-6

Keeping the First Commandment

In stark terms, the passage set out the relationship between God and humans. He blesses those who keep the commandment and curses those who don't. But, how do we know to keep the commandment?

We keep the commandment in four ways: when we develop the theological virtues, when we serve God, and when we put everything and everyone second in our lives compared to God. We'll consider the question of religious images in a few moments.

Faith, Hope, and Love

What are the theological virtues? These are faith, hope, and love. We call them theological because they are gifts from God. We can't develop them by ourselves. We can define faith as reaching out and trusting in God. It is a work of the Spirit. Note that it is not certitude. Faith can entertain sincere doubts, ones that we struggle with. But it is not a doubt that a person clings to because he simply wants to. It is not disbelief.

When we look forward to God's action in life, we have hope. It is not despair, the notion God will never forgive or accept me. It does not presume that I don't need God or that God will always forgive me so I can just go on sinning.

The virtue of love has two parts: a devotion to God and a respect for others. It is not indifference and apathy. It is not ingratitude or even hatred of God. It is not spiritual laziness.

Serving God in Prayer, Helping Others, and Exercising Religious Rights

When we keep the first commandment, we are called to serve him. We acknowledge his place when we pray. We take time and create a space to sit in his presence. We worship, honor and adore God. We also pray for our needs and the needs of others.

We serve him in our daily lives. We make those small sacrifices to help others. And we keep those promises we make to God and others. Finally, we serve God when we exercise our right to religious freedom and respect the choices of others. A relationship with God can never be forced. It must be always be freely chosen.

God as a Priority

We keep the commandment when we keep our focus only on him. There are no substitutes. No superstition, no seeking fortune tellers, or no worship of other gods. It means not tempting God's goodness. It means matching our actions to our words. Money, relationships or reputation are not more important than God. Finally, when we keep the commandment it means rejecting

atheism or stubborn agnosticism. Simply saying, "there is no God" is not an option. Neither is saying, "I don't know if there is a God or not and I don't care."

Religious Images

Let's return to a portion of the first commandment passage from Exodus 20.

You will not make an idol for yourselves, nor an image of anything in the heavens above, in the earth below, or in the water under the earth.

Exodus 20:4

Judaism and Islam have no images. So why do we have pictures and statues in Church? When Jesus was born into the world, he revealed the face of God and his Kingdom. Pictures and statues represent both. When we pray in front of either, we are not asking prayers from the image but through the image directly from Christ and the faithful in heaven. We pray to Christ. We ask Mary, the saints and angels to pray with us and for us.

Lists are good. They help us keep our priorities in clear view. The Ten Commandments serve the same function. They show us our spiritual priorities, especially the first commandment. This commandment sets the tone for and guides the rest of the commandments.

Closing Question:

How do you put God first in your life?

Reference to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraphs 2084-2141.

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