

The ten commandments are 3,000 years old. God etched them in stone and carved a foundation for moral behavior. Every Jewish and Christian child has memorized them. Even Jesus did. In Mark's Gospel, when a rich young man asks him what to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus quotes from the ten commandments. Truth be told, he omits a few, and confuses the order of the ones he remembered. Jesus would never have passed the finals in my fourth grade religion class. When I was in grade school I had a twelve-inch ruler with the commandments printed 5 on each side. We never measured a line without remembering how our lives were measured.

In learning the commandments we figured out that some were harder to keep than others. As kids, we could easily slip on four, seven, and eight--we disobeyed our parents, we stole, and we lied. But other commandments were a snap. Number one, for example--"Thou shalt not have other gods." No problem. People worshipped other gods in pagan temples. We didn't have those in our neighborhood. I didn't think I was breaking the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," but nobody ever explained that one to me very well. "Worry about that when you're an adult," my fourth grade teacher said, and most of us have been worried about it ever since. Some penitents in the confessional finish their list of sins with the phrase, "Forgive me for these and all the sins of my past life, especially for breaking the sixth commandment," as if that one is the most damning of them all.

But it's not. The most important of them all is probably number one. It's the longest of the ten, the only one God explains in detail: "I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery. You shall not have other gods besides me." False gods are not just Appolo, Diana, and Zeus. False gods include money, sex, power, and ourselves. In a way, the other nine commandments all derive from the first--they explain the false gods that keep us from desiring the one God. Lying, envy, disrespect--these are behaviors of people who have turned away from the one God to pursue another.

Other people can be false gods to us. Many times we act in a way not to please God but to please someone else--our parents, a spouse, children, an employer, a priest. Many people place demands on our behavior, and we often do what they want, even against our better judgment. But we don't have to please other people. We have to please God and God alone. Jesus himself in his childhood told Mary and Joseph he had to do his Father's business. And the night before he died he wanted the cup to pass from him, but he prayed that God's will be done. In the ultimate act of self-denial, Jesus needed approval from on one--not even from himself--he needed approval from no one but God alone.

If the ten commandments form the foundation for moral behavior, the first is the cornerstone for the rest. If God alone is our God, our behavior will be moral.