

No Other Gods

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Are we serving priorities or gods ahead of the God we profess to worship?

The Ten Commandments are fundamental to the Christian and Jewish faiths. Given by God to the children of Israel through the prophet Moses, the first two of these commandments direct our worship and our priorities. In the first, the Lord commanded, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). Centuries later, when Jesus was asked, “Which is the great commandment in the law?” He answered, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” (Matthew 22:36–37).

The second of the Ten Commandments elaborates the direction to have no other gods and identifies what should be the ultimate priority in our lives as His children. “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing” in the heavens or the earth (Exodus 20:4). The commandment then adds, “Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them” (Exodus 20:5). More than merely forbidding physical idols, this states a fundamental priority for all time. Jehovah explains, “For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, ... shewing mercy unto ... them that love me, and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20:5–6). The meaning of *jealous* is revealing. Its Hebrew origin means “possessing sensitive and deep feelings” (Exodus 20:5, footnote *b*). Thus we offend God when we “serve” other gods—when we have other first priorities.¹

I.

What other priorities are being “served” ahead of God by persons—even religious persons—in our day? Consider these possibilities, all common in our world:

1. •Cultural and family traditions
2. •Political correctness
3. •Career aspirations
4. •Material possessions
5. •Recreational pursuits
6. •Power, prominence, and prestige

If none of these examples seems to apply to any one of us, we can probably suggest others that do. The principle is more important than individual examples. The principle is not whether we have other priorities. The question posed by the second commandment is “What is our *ultimate* priority?” Are we serving priorities or gods ahead of the God we profess to worship? Have we forgotten to follow the Savior who taught that if we love Him, we will keep His commandments? (see John 14:15). If so, our priorities have been turned upside down by the spiritual

apathy and undisciplined appetites so common in our day.

II.

For Latter-day Saints, God's commandments are based on and inseparable from God's plan for His children—the great plan of salvation. This plan, sometimes called the “great plan of happiness” (Alma 42:8), explains our origin and destiny as children of God—where we came from, why we are here, and where we are going. The plan of salvation explains the purpose of creation and the conditions of mortality, including God's commandments, the need for a Savior, and the vital role of mortal and eternal families. If we Latter-day Saints, who have been given this knowledge, do not establish our priorities in accord with this plan, we are in danger of serving other gods.

Knowledge of God's plan for His children gives Latter-day Saints a unique perspective on marriage and family. We are correctly known as a family-centered church. Our theology begins with heavenly parents, and our highest aspiration is to attain the fulness of eternal exaltation. We know this is possible only in a family relationship. We know that the marriage of a man and a woman is necessary for the accomplishment of God's plan. Only this marriage will provide the approved setting for mortal birth and to prepare family members for eternal life. We look on marriage and the bearing and nurturing of children as part of God's plan and a sacred duty of those given the opportunity to do so. We believe that the ultimate treasures on earth and in heaven are our children and our posterity.

III.

Because of what we understand about the potentially eternal role of the family, we grieve at the sharply declining numbers of births and marriages in many Western countries whose historic cultures are Christian and Jewish. Responsible sources report the following:

1. •The United States now has the lowest birthrate in its history,² and in many European Union nations and other developed countries, birthrates are below the level necessary to maintain their populations.³ This threatens the survival of cultures and even of nations.
2. •In America, the percentage of young adults ages 18 to 29 who are married fell from 59 percent in 1960 to 20 percent by 2010.⁴ The median age for first marriage is now at its highest level in history: 26 for women and almost 29 for men.⁵
3. •In many countries and cultures (1) the traditional family of a married mother and father and children is coming to be the exception rather than the rule, (2) the pursuit of a career instead of marriage and the bearing of children is an increasing choice of many young women, and (3) the role and perceived necessity of fathers is diminishing.

In the midst of these concerning trends, we are also conscious that God's plan is for all of His children and that God loves all of His children, everywhere.⁶ The first chapter of the Book of Mormon declares that God's “power, and goodness, and mercy are over all the inhabitants of the earth” (1 Nephi 1:14). A later chapter declares that “he hath given [his salvation] free for all men” and that “all men are privileged the one like unto the other, and none are forbidden” (2 Nephi 26:27–28). Consequently, the scriptures teach that we are responsible to be compassionate and charitable (loving) toward all men (see 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 1 John 3:17; D&C 121:45).

IV.

We are also respectful of the religious beliefs of all people, even of those increasing numbers who profess no belief in God. We know that through the God-given power of choice, many will hold beliefs contrary to ours, but we are hopeful that others will be equally respectful of our religious beliefs and understand that our beliefs compel us to some different choices and behaviors than theirs. For example, we believe that, as an essential part of His plan of salvation, God has established an eternal standard that sexual relations should occur only between a man and a woman who are married.

The power to create mortal life is the most exalted power God has given to His children. Its use was mandated by God's first commandment to Adam and Eve (see Genesis 1:28), but other important commandments were given to forbid its misuse (see Exodus 20:14; 1 Thessalonians 4:3). The emphasis we place on the law of chastity is explained by our understanding of the purpose of our procreative powers in the accomplishment of God's plan. Outside the bonds of marriage between a man and a woman, all uses of our procreative powers are to one degree or another sinful and contrary to God's plan for the exaltation of His children.

The importance we attach to the law of chastity explains our commitment to the pattern of marriage that originated with Adam and Eve and has continued through the ages as God's pattern for the procreative relationship between His sons and daughters and for the nurturing of His children. Fortunately, many persons affiliated with other denominations or organizations agree with us on the nature and importance of marriage, some on the basis of religious doctrine and others on the basis of what they deem best for society.

Our knowledge of God's plan for His children⁷ explains why we are distressed that more and more children are born outside of marriage—currently 41 percent of all births in the United States⁸—and that the number of couples living together without marriage has increased dramatically in the past half century. Five decades ago, only a tiny percentage of first marriages were preceded by cohabitation. Now cohabitation precedes 60 percent of marriages.⁹ And this is increasingly accepted, especially among teenagers. Recent survey data found about 50 percent of teenagers stating that out-of-wedlock childbearing was a “worthwhile lifestyle.”¹⁰

V.

There are many political and social pressures for legal and policy changes to establish behaviors contrary to God's decrees about sexual morality and contrary to the eternal nature and purposes of marriage and childbearing. These pressures have already authorized same-gender marriages in various states and nations. Other pressures would confuse gender or homogenize those differences between men and women that are essential to accomplish God's great plan of happiness.

Our understanding of God's plan and His doctrine gives us an eternal perspective that does not allow us to condone such behaviors or to find justification in the laws that permit them. And, unlike other organizations that can change their policies and even their doctrines, our policies are determined by the truths God has identified as unchangeable.

Our twelfth article of faith states our belief in being subject to civil authority and “in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law.” But man's laws cannot make moral what God has declared immoral. Commitment to our highest priority—to love and serve God—requires that we look to His law for our standard of behavior. For example, we remain under divine command not to commit adultery or fornication even when those acts are no

longer crimes under the laws of the states or countries where we reside. Similarly, laws legalizing so-called “same-sex marriage” do not change God’s law of marriage or His commandments and our standards concerning it. We remain under covenant to love God and keep His commandments and to refrain from serving other gods and priorities—even those becoming popular in our particular time and place.

In this determination we may be misunderstood, and we may incur accusations of bigotry, suffer discrimination, or have to withstand invasions of our free exercise of religion. If so, I think we should remember our first priority—to serve God—and, like our pioneer predecessors, push our personal handcarts forward with the same fortitude they exhibited.

A teaching of President Thomas S. Monson applies to this circumstance. At this conference 27 years ago, he boldly declared: “Let us have the courage to defy the consensus, the courage to stand for principle. Courage, not compromise, brings the smile of God’s approval. Courage becomes a living and an attractive virtue when it is regarded not only as a willingness to die manfully, but as the determination to live decently. A moral coward is one who is afraid to do what he thinks is right because others will disapprove or laugh. Remember that all men have their fears, but those who face their fears with dignity have courage as well.”¹¹

I pray that we will not let the temporary challenges of mortality cause us to forget the great commandments and priorities we have been given by our Creator and our Savior. We must not set our hearts so much on the things of the world and aspire to the honors of men (see D&C 121:35) that we stop trying to achieve our eternal destiny. We who know God’s plan for His children—we who have made covenants to participate in it—have a clear responsibility. We must never deviate from our paramount desire, which is to achieve eternal life.¹² We must never dilute our first priority—to have no other gods and to serve no other priorities ahead of God the Father and His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

May God help us to understand this priority and to be understood by others as we seek to pursue it in a wise and loving way, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See, for example, Doctrine and Covenants 124:84.

2. See Joyce A. Martin and others, “Births: Final Data for 2011,” *National Vital Statistics Reports*, vol. 62, no. 1 (June 28, 2013), 4; Gloria Goodale, “Behind a Looming Baby Bust,” *Christian Science Monitor Weekly*, Feb. 4, 2013, 21, 23.

3. See Population Reference Bureau, “2012 World Population Data Sheet,” www.prb.org/Publications/Datasheets/2012/world-population-data-sheet/data-sheet.aspx.

4. See D’Vera Cohn and others, “Barely Half of U.S. Adults Are Married—a Record Low,” Pew Research

Center, Social and Demographic Trends, Dec. 14, 2011, available at www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/12/14/barely-half-of-u-s-adults-are-married-a-record-low; “Rash Retreat from Marriage,” *Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 2 and 9, 2012, 34.

5. U.S. Census Bureau, “Estimated Median Age at First Marriage, by Sex: 1890 to the Present,” available at www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/ms2.xls.

6. See Dallin H. Oaks, “All Men Everywhere,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2006, 77–80.

7. See Dallin H. Oaks, “The Great Plan of Happiness,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1993, 72–75.

8. See Martin, “Births: Final Data for 2011,” 4.

9. See *The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America, 2012* (2012), 76.

10. See *The State of Our Unions*, 101, 102.

11. Thomas S. Monson, “Courage Counts,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1986, 41.

12. See Dallin H. Oaks, “Desire,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2011, 42–45.