

[Exodus 20:2-6:] "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. "You shall have no other gods before me. "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. [Luther's Explanation to the First Commandment:] We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

1. Lutherans usually get the Ten Commandments questions wrong on Jeopardy! That's because there are three numbering systems for the Decalogue (the fancy word for the Ten Commandments: literally, "The Ten Words"). We know that there are Ten Commandments because that's inspired: Moses said in Deuteronomy 4:13 (among other places) about the LORD, He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets. While the number is inspired, the numbering system is not.
2. Jews make the First Commandment, I am the LORD your God. That means that in addition to the three commandments we have on the first table of the law, they have one preceding, making it four. They combine what we would call the Ninth and Tenth Commandments into simply, Thou shalt not covet. Many mainline Christian denominations do the same, combining what we call the Ninth and Tenth Commandments. To make four in the first table of the law, they expand what we call the First Commandment into two, splitting up the concepts of Thou shalt have no other gods and Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image. It's good to know those different numbering systems if you're talking to someone about the Ten Commandments. And God be praised that you're having that conversation, because you both obviously take the Decalogue seriously! No matter how we number it, the First Commandment is about God first. What a great conversation to have!
3. Jesus had a conversation about the Decalogue with an expert in the law in our reading for today. As an expert, he should have known the answer to the question. But he asked in such a way as to leave wiggle room. He literally asked, "How will I inherit life—as one who does." Instead of focusing on doing the entire law, he was focusing on the inheritance by doing a minimum process. Jesus correctly made it all or nothing, instead of just getting over the bar. To inherit eternal life, you have to do it all! {Read verses 25-28.}
4. The expert in the law summarized both tables of the law correctly. The First Commandment over-arches them all! We fear, love, and trust in God above all things when we keep the first table of the law: remembering our relationship with God first. We fear, love and trust in God above all things when we keep the second table of the law: remembering God first in our relationship with our neighbor. The thing the expert in the law choked on is the word *all* in *all things*: all your heart ... all your soul ... all your strength ... all your mind. As Jesus intended, the answer should have been, "No way! There's no way I've done that." Jesus pointed to what must *always* be done, not

some process of doing. But the expert in the law (and we, because we all have a little expert in the law in our hearts) wanted to focus on the process of doing. That's because we've not *always* done what's right. As a matter of fact, every time we choose to do something contrary to God's will, in addition to breaking His will, we are also sinning against the First Commandment. To be very clear: *every* sin is a sin against the First Commandment. That's because we put something else before God when He told us You shall have no other gods before me. This is scary. And this is why the expert replied the way he did. {Read verse 29.}

5. I'm going to give away the answer right away. We can't justify ourselves. That means we can't declare ourselves to be "not-guilty" of any sin because we say so. We simply can't because we *are* guilty of sin. The First Commandment is inscribed in stone that is harder than our stony hearts, which try to scratch it out—a futile process of *doing*. Now what? What now is that Jesus upholds the First Commandment! {Read verses 30-37a.}
6. The expert in the law was still hung up on the whole "doing" thing. "The one who was doing mercy" is what the expert said. Jesus flat-out corrects that process idea by giving a simple command. {Read verse 37b.} This was not to be a process. Jesus said, "Do it." Be it—this is who you are to be. One mistake and you are no longer doing it, even if you want to start the process again. And this is the hardest thing to hear of all—if Jesus would not have done it Himself for us. Of all the things that Jesus points out to us, He points out mercy.
7. Marvel at the fact that Jesus upheld the First Commandment perfectly. He *did*—actually *did*—it! And why mercy here? He *did* it ... for you! *Mercy* is showing kindness to someone because you see their helpless, wretched state. Sin makes us unable to help ourselves. Sin makes us children of perdition.
8. Jesus kept the First Commandment by wanting what His Father wants. He and the Father are One. The LORD wants us to be saved from perdition. We see ourselves as the beaten and bloodied man, left for dead by our own attempts to talk our way out of what we've done, trying to pay our way when that doesn't work, and in the end trying to make God happy with us on our terms, which like the expert in the law are always in our favor but never earn God's favor. Jesus has mercy on us. His perfect life ransoms us from not keeping the Decalogue and its Chief Commandment. We have no other gods because only our God saved us by giving that perfect life for us on the cross.
9. So, are we "process" people or are we "do" people? That process mentality will always appeal to us. But God in His mercy made sure we have seen that the process doesn't cut it *and* He made sure that we see what He actually did. He changes us into "do" people: people who fear, love, and trust in God above all things because He saved us. When we do sin, we know Jesus has saved us from that sin. So we do repentance: we do confess our sin and do turn from sin. This we do because Jesus had mercy on us, not to save ourselves. We don't even stand a chance of upholding the First Commandment. But rejoice! Jesus did it. So today is another day God has had mercy on us. Today is another day we get to do all in Christ because Christ has done all for us. Why would we want any other God? Amen.