

“...It is written, ‘you shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’”  
(Jesus, Matthew 4:10b)

“Why does God command us to worship?” this may be a somewhat subversive question. Whether the questioner is insinuating that the God of the Bible is some petty, narcissistic, flattery loving authoritarian or they merely retain some misguided assumptions about what a “loving God” should or shouldn’t be commanding, this question suggests a commitment to the pervasive spirit of entitlement and personal autonomy that dominates our culture. The question may as well be “who is God to tell me who to worship?”

Behind this question, I think, is the premise that demanding devotion or veneration for oneself in anyway is vulgar; worship must never be a requirement, especially by the object of the worship; that would constitute a conflict of interest and would be essentially self-serving. This sounds reasonable until the questioner goes home and discovers their spouse in the arms of another person; or until, after working and saving money for a child’s future, the person learns that the child has stolen and maxed out their credit cards. Certainly a wife does not worship her husband any more than children worship their parents but the bonds of respect and reverence that we experience everyday are deeply rooted in the greater command that we “shall” worship God. If there is no mandate or regulation from God for worship and devotion, then, by extension, there is no offense in adultery or extortion.

True, worship should not be done purely out of obligation. However, removing the obligation altogether actually robs worship of moral value (and, by extension every relationship which is built on respect, trust and love). If God has not commanded us to worship then it is not actually wrong for us to treat him and all his gifts with indifference or even hostility; nor is it really superior for us to worship him. Worship in this view is essentially a morally neutral activity. We are then relieved of all responsibility, liability, and punishment that may result from deficient or nonexistent worship and worship itself is relieved of nearly all objective meaning.

In answering this question it may be helpful to define a few terms. First of all the word “command,” as I am using it, is an active command; a royal decree constituting a law. One may say that God commands worship the way a sun set commands awe or a great leader commands respect. This is certainly true of God but is not what is intended in the question. If that were the case there would be no controversy. The problem is one of authority and responsibility. So “command,” for our consideration, is a divine mandate or ruling that is to be obeyed.

Secondly the word “Worship” means, on its face, to ascribe or acknowledge the worth of someone or something. More specifically (especially with respect to a biblical view of worship) it is the rendering of reverence for someone of higher rank, class or nature. In

both Hebrew and Greek the concepts is associated with the physical posture of bowing or full prostration which itself is a symbol of complete submission. Biblical worship is expressed through consistent genuine loving submission, trust, praise, devoted service, obedience and fellowship. It is the joyful, affectionate centering of one's life around the person and purposes of God.

God not only commands that we worship Him, He commands exclusive worship. Furthermore he has regulated and defined the appropriate means of worship so that there is a right and a wrong way to worship Him. He has even decreed an active punishment for those who do not worship him. It is true that commanding worship like this is obscene and vulgar – if the object of the worship is not worthy of such worship and the subjects are not in any way indebted to the object. It would be blasphemous for a mortal man to demand from other mortal men the worship due God (unless he were God in human flesh). Many people, even Christians, retain such a tiny, watered down, humanized image of God that it is hardly a wonder that we are offended by such a command.

But whatever image man may serve, God is not like man, nor is he like anything else that is created. God's command for worship does not spring from narcissism nor is he compelled by any need of his own. Narcissism is, by definition, an obsessive pre-occupation with oneself based on a delusion of undue grandeur. God is, necessarily, a perfect and purely actual being; he has no potential to become more than what He is and He has need of nothing. He has always been and will always be absolutely unchangeably perfect in glory and holiness. He is also the only source of being for all that exists outside of Himself. If He were anything less than these he could not be God. Thus if God is God then He is uniquely justified and qualified to command us to worship because we are indebted to him for our existence; not just our creation, but our continued sustained existence forever. This doesn't even take into account the goodness he has shown us in the atonement.

Many questions arise here but I am endeavoring to answer only one. I can think of three reasons why God has commanded that we worship him. Unfortunately none of them recommend relief for the fragile ego of the neo-pagan or secular humanist; especially those vehemently opposed to any notion of being obligated to worship someone higher than themselves.

The first reason can be summed up in the simple phrase that often accompanies the specific command to worship only God: "...for the Lord your God is a jealous God among you." (Deut 6) Yes, the Lord commands that we worship him because He is a jealous God. He is jealous for his people and he is jealous for his own glory. The idea of jealousy here must not be understood as an outrageous over reaction to a rival as it is among humans. This jealousy is not born of fear or insecurity; after all God has no true rivals.

No one, not even Satan could ever really hope to supplant God. Nor is God's jealousy tainted with presumptuous stupidity; God has a perfect understanding of himself and is in no way deluded. To say that God is jealous means that He does not tolerate any who pretend rivalry; he is the fierce avenger of any that depart from him.

God is jealous for us just as a husband is jealous for his wife and will go to great lengths to keep her from illegitimate suitors. God knows that He is the sole source and standard for all that is right and he is the sole source of life for everything that lives. Man, by worshiping something other than God is submitting himself to something that is insufficient and unworthy even corrupt. Such worship only breeds corruption and deficiency in the worshiper. God's commands that we worship Him, therefore, is a good and loving command because He knows that He is the only thing in existence that is sufficiently worthy of worship.

Perhaps most significantly, God commands our worship because he is jealous for his own glory. Suppose a man took a picture of a famous painting like "Storm on the Sea of Galilee" by Rembrandt and he had it printed on a canvass and mounted it on his wall. Now suppose that the man had a fairly uninformed or unintelligent friend come for dinner who lauded the photographer for his skill with a paint brush. If the photographer affirmed that he had painted the piece he would be misleading his friend and receiving honor that he is not worthy of. When we worship something other than God we are attributing his glory and good works to something that is not truly the source of that glory. Paul says in Romans one that God has made himself and his glory known to all of mankind so that we are without excuse. Thus our rendering of praise to something other than him is dishonest and a God who is just and true can not tolerate such deception. The Lord has made us for himself and he is worthy of all praise. For us to treat his glory and goodness with less reverence than it deserves is sin. To treat God's glory and mercy with less than absolute devotion and worship is the epitome of narcissism; it is, in the end, the undue worship of oneself.

But of course God knows that man will not worship him for the will of man is so damaged by the fall that he "does not seek God" and "does not want God in his thinking." This brings me to the third reason for the command. God's command to worship Himself is really the essence of the law; to love and fear God with the whole of your life and person is what Jesus called "the first commandment" on which hang all the law and the prophets. So what purpose does the law serve? Paul says in Galatians 3:10-13 & 19b

But those who depend on the law to make them right with God are under his curse, for the Scriptures say, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the commands that are written in God's Book of the Law." So it is clear that no one can be

made right with God by trying to keep the law. For the Scriptures say, “It is through faith that a righteous person has life.” This way of faith is very different from the way of law, which says, “It is through obeying the law that a person has life.”

But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing...”

“..Why, then, was the law given? It was given alongside the promise to show people their sins. But the law was designed to last only until the coming of the child who was promised...” (NLT)

In short, the law reveals to us that we are spiritually dead slaves of sin who are answerable to an almighty, just and perfect God to the end that we might be subjected to either his righteous condemnation or his free gift of grace which we have by faith in our substitute Jesus. Mercy is meaningless without actual guilt and guilt cannot exist without a law.

Therefore, since God is the perfect and holy, all-powerful, all-knowing, infinite, self-existent source of all that exists outside of himself, we are indebted to him for our continued existence and he is uniquely qualified and justified to make demands upon his creation. His command to worship himself flows from his righteous jealousy for love and truth and all that pertains to his glory. In the end the command to worship (which is the essence of the Mosaic Law) was given to us that we might be held accountable for our sin unto condemnation and (for God’s elect) then eligible for salvation by grace through faith in Christ unto the glory of God.