

“God’s Rules for Living Today” (Part 2)
“You shall have no other gods”

Last week I started a series on the Ten Commandments. We looked at the moral climate in which we hear the commandments today, and examined the purpose of God’s law and commandments. Today, we’ll look at the first commandment. It’s found in Exodus 20, verses 1 to 3. “And God spoke all these words: ‘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.’” The first commandment is: “You shall have no other gods before me.” (Or as the Good News Translation has it, “Worship no god but me”).

When this commandment was first given to the Israelites, there were many other gods that were worshiped. There were national gods: Ashtoreth was goddess of the Phoenicians, Baal, was the god of the Canaanite tribes, Molech, was the god of the Ammonites, Dagon, was the Philistine god. People believed that various gods ruled certain geographic areas or natural phenomena. There were fertility gods, storm gods, sun gods, sea gods. And you had to try to keep them happy! If one god seemed more powerful than yours, then you worshiped that other god. It’s in that context that God says to the Israelites, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3).

Notice, this is not a command against atheism. It doesn’t say, “You shall believe in a god.” Rather, it has to do with worshipping the *true* God – the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus! We really don’t have to be told to worship a god! We humans, instinctively, will worship *something*. We will attach *ultimate value* to *something: something, or someone*, will become the most important thing in our life. The question is: Who or what will this be, that we value above all else? Whatever it is, that becomes our *God*!

Notice, also, God doesn’t say, “You can worship other gods along with me; I just need to be your favorite!” In the next verse, in the next commandment, God says, “I am a jealous God” (Exodus 20:4). Some people don’t like that. It makes it sound like God is moody and possessive! We’re not supposed to be jealous, but it’s OK for God to be jealous!

But I think we can get the feel of this if we think about *marriage*. In the marriage vows, we commit solely to another person in a singular relationship. I wouldn’t like it if my wife Nancy said to me, “I have other boyfriends and lovers, but don’t worry, Harry, you’re my favorite.” No! I need to be “the one”. (I hope she feels the same way!). It’s that kind of “jealousy”. “Worship no god but me”, God says.

God knew what the Israelites were going to face as they began their journey in the wilderness and into the promised land of Canaan. The Israelites would be pressured to be like the people around them, and worship these local cultural deities where they settled: to acknowledge these other gods as their creator, to depend on these other gods for their life and safety, to allow belief in these gods to shape their morals and behaviors. That’s why God gives this commandment to them.

Now one good thing is that we don’t have to worry about all these false gods, these cultural

gods, like the Israelites had to worry about! Right? Wrong! We have *our* cultural deities. No, not Molech or Dagon or Ashtoreth. But other false gods. Things we idolize and attach ultimate value to, things we devote ourselves to and that shape what we believe and how we act, false gods we trust in to keep us happy and safe. What are some of the gods we worship today?

We can worship science and technology. We've seen breathtaking advances in science and technology. While we praise God for its marvels, it's easy to put so much trust in science and technology that we idolize it and think it will solve all our human problems.

In the last message I mentioned Dr. Wallace Fisher and his book *Stand Fast in Faith*. It is a provocative book on the Ten Commandments. He has some cutting words relating to our tendency to worship science and technology: "Our heady scientific climate, fed by a galloping technology, and an unparalleled affluence, tempts us to ignore the true source and sustainer of our life. We think of ourselves as the creators and sustainers... Western people, especially in America, behave as though they had fashioned themselves, their mates, their children, and their world."

We can worship money and material things. The god of materialism permeates our American way of life. Most of us don't think of ourselves as materialistic, but it's hard to avoid in our culture where money and possessions are so highly valued. Jesus clearly identified "mammon" or material things as a false god we can get sucked in to worshiping. He said, "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matthew 6:24).

We can worship our jobs or work. I have met people so busy working and establishing their careers that everything else takes a back seat – including family, church, personal ethics. I once heard a theological seminary president admit, tongue-in-cheek, that his real wife was his job and ministry, not the woman back home!

We can make pleasure our god. Now there's nothing wrong with having fun, but it can become the all-consuming purpose of life. I heard of Caribbean resorts that advertise vacation packages as "Hedonism II". One promises this: "Bring a friend. Make some new ones. Stay up all night. Sleep 'til noon. Have a pina colada. Watch a blazing sunset with a brand-new friend. Ask a total stranger to rub oil on your back. Water-ski. Scuba and sail. Eat what you want, when you want and as much as you want. It's all included. This is Hedonism II, and there is no place like it." (You're thinking, "Sign me up!"). Again, pleasure and fun is a healthy part of life. But not if it becomes more important than loving God, and loving our neighbor.

We can make a god out of the TV or computer or cell phone. Our life can so revolve around these electronic devices that we allow them to determine our daily schedule, whether we have time to pray or read the Bible, or to spend time in actual conversation with spouse or kids, or be involved in community. There is a cartoon showing a man and woman sitting on the sofa watching TV. And on the TV there is an actor dressed as a doctor, who says, "Feeling tired, headachy, listless, worn out?.....then why don't you turn the TV off and go to bed!"

Some people spend a huge chunk of the day and evening on Facebook or Instagram or watching TV.

A lot of times the false gods we worship are *people*. Not *something*, but *someone*. ***We can worship and idolize sports heroes or movie stars or musical performers.*** Just think of the adoring crowd of teenagers and young adults at a rock concert! Think of people who get their cues for how they dress or what they believe from some movie star or pop figure. A man named Don Kline, who has a special ministry among the CEO's of this country, tells of chatting with a flight attendant, who let her guard down to tell him, "If you promise not to tell anyone, I'll tell you who's on this plane." "OK," Don said, "Who's traveling with us?" The flight attendant replied, "Madonna!" Don said, "You mean the mother of our Lord?" "No, no," the flight attendant insisted. "The *real* Madonna!"

We can make a god out of another person! Young lovers can sometimes make a god out of one another (I guess old lovers can too!). This person is going to make me so happy and meet all my needs! This reminds me of the story of a young man so infatuated with a beautiful young lady that one evening, overcome by romantic impulses, he flung himself at her pretty little feet and vowed: "Please marry me, Shirley Ann. If you don't, I'll die." Well, she didn't. Sure enough, 63 years later, he died. Of course, if we're in the first stages of romantic love, and tend to make a god or goddess out of our partner, a few years of marriage usually cures that! We realize this person is, like everyone else, a flawed human being!

Well, we can go on and on and on. What other gods are you prone to worship? What can easily become the most important thing in your life? At different times in my life I've tended to worship *sports*. I've gotten so engrossed in my teams, that at times I've have had to consciously pull back, and quit watching these things that have ruled over my schedule and emotions.

The first commandment, *which is really the one on which the others hinge*, says, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3).

Why is this commandment so important? Well, *who, or what, we attach ultimate value to shapes who we are and how we live. Christians believe there is only one true God, the God revealed in Jesus. And if we worship any lesser god or trust in any other god to keep us safe, or make us happy, or give ultimate meaning to our lives, it's going to be insufficient, and let us down.* Psalm 16:4 says, "Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows."

In the early 1990's, several university professors passed out copies of the Ten Commandments to their students and asked them to arrange the commandments in order of importance. Over 90% of the students rearranged the commandments and placed the 6 commandments dealing with our relationship to other people above the first 4 commandments dealing with our relationship with God. But you see, we first have to get it right by choosing the right God! That sets the tone for our whole life.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment is, this is how He replied: "Love the

Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment”(Matthew 22:37-38). Only then did He add this: “And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself””(Matthew 22:39).

The first commandment is, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3).

It’s so important to choose the right God! It is the God revealed in Jesus Christ who created us, who sustains us day by day. And it is this God who – because we so often choose the wrong gods – seeks us out, offers us pardon, invites us into relationship, and calls us to joyfully and willingly submit to His will and purposes. When in our freedom we choose to devote ourselves to the *true God and living God*, we set our feet on a road that leads to life!

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