



The Ten Commandments (6)

“You shall have no other gods before me.” (3)

Exodus 20:1-3

Romans 1:18-25

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We are working our way through the Ten Commandments. This is the third sermon on the first commandment. The first sermon was on the fact that the first commandment requires that we believe that God exists because he tells us so in his word. In the second sermon on the first commandment we looked at what it meant to have other gods besides the one true God and we looked at what it means to have the true God as our God. And there we focused on loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. Having God as our God means that we love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and we saw that includes loving Jesus in the same way because Jesus is God together with the Father.

But not having other gods besides the true God and having the true God as our God requires more than loving God. The first commandment is very broad and very fundamental. It has to do with who or what we worship. It has to do with how we think about ourselves and our purpose in the world. It has to do with who or what we trust to give us the things that we need. It has to do with who or what we recognize as the highest authority in our lives. It has to do with anything that the Bible tells us is our proper attitude towards God.

This is such an important subject that I thought it would be profitable for us to spend at least one more sermon thinking about it. This time we will look at a number of texts from the NT which deal with the subject

and reflect on some of the ways that we are tempted to have other gods in our lives.

Romans 1:18-25 is an important NT passage that deals with what it means to have other gods before the one true God. It has a number of words or phrases that describe ways that sinful human beings do not have God as their God. It says in verse 21 that “they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.” It says in verse 23 that they “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.” And it says in verse 25 that “they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator.” These are all ways that sinful men and women break the first commandment. And the phrase that sums up all the rest is the one that says that they “worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator.” This is a very important way that the Bible explains what it is to have other gods besides the true God of the Bible. To have another god is to worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator.

You see, to have a god besides the Creator of all things is to have some part of the creation as your god. This is a logical necessity because everything that exists, exists in one of two categories: Creator or created. There is one Creator who is God. He is the source of everything else. Everything else is created by God. Everything falls into one of these two categories. There is the Creator and there is everything else. And so, if you are not worshiping and serving the Creator, you are worshiping and serving someone or something that has been created by God. This is what mankind does in his sinfulness. Instead of worshiping the Creator who created him, he turns away from his Creator and worships something in the creation instead.

This highlights the stupidity of having another god before the true God. There is only one being who is worthy of worship. There is only one being that is not a created being. There is only one being who is in the category of uncreated divine being. There is only one being who made all things and who holds them in existence from moment to moment. There is only one being of which it can be said, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever” (Romans

11:36). There is only one being who is so powerful that he created everything else simply by speaking. There is only one being whose “eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.”

There is only one kind of being that is the proper object of worship and that is a divine being. Nothing else is worthy of worship because everything else is dependent upon God for its very existence. There is only one divine being and that is the Creator, the God who reveals himself through the creation and in his word. This God is in a category all by himself and he is alone the proper object of worship. He is the only God and so he is the only one who is rightly treated as a God.

But instead sinful human beings turn away from the Creator and worship some part of the creation. How ridiculous is that! On the one hand you have the divine creator of all things whose glory fills the heavens and the earth, and on the other hand you have some part of the creation and you choose it to worship and serve instead of the one who created it. That is what it means to have other gods besides the one true God. Paul writes in Romans 1:22-23, “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.”

Now so far in our study of the first commandment, the other gods have been pagan gods of some kind. The Bible lumps them into one category called idols. The sin of breaking the first commandment is the sin of idolatry. To have another god is to have an idol for a god. The world of the OT and the world of the NT was full of pagan gods and Israel was not to worship any of these gods. But that is not a temptation for any of us. It still is a reality in some parts of the world. And pagan worship is making a comeback in the West. But I think that for us these pagan gods are not much of an attraction.

But the NT teaches that other things can be idols for us besides pagan gods. It is possible to worship something in the creation instead of the Creator even when there is no temptation for us to worship some pagan god. The NT teaches us that there are all kinds of ways that we worship and serve created things even if we have no inclination to worship pagan gods. It teaches us then that idolatry is broader than the worship

of pagan gods. And in doing so it brings the first commandment much closer to home for us.

There are two verses in Paul's writings that refer to covetousness as idolatry. Ephesians 5:5, "5For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God." Colossians 3:5, "5Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." So, Paul here extends the idea of idolatry to include covetousness. He is saying that we break the first commandment by coveting. Coveting is a way of having another god besides the God of the Bible. This shows that if we break the tenth commandment we are also breaking the first commandment.

So, having another god besides the true God includes more than having a pagan god. Having another god includes coveting. The sin of idolatry includes coveting. Now the Greek word that is translated as covet can also be translated as greed. So, the idea includes coveting but also greed. Coveting is an excessive desire for what other people have. The tenth commandment says that we are not to covet anything that is our neighbor's. Greed includes coveting, but it is broader. Greed is an inordinate desire for more – more money or more possessions.

So, coveting and greed are both excessive desires for stuff – for money or for things. The key idea is that it is a desire for something in the creation that is too strong. The key idea in coveting and greed is that of excessive or inordinate desires for something in the creation. And by linking these excessive desires with idolatry, Paul is telling us that these excessive desires for something in the creation is a form of having another god besides the God of the Bible.

So, we can see how this links with Paul's definition of idolatry as worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator. When our desire for anything on earth is stronger than our desire for God we are worshipping the creature rather than the Creator. This brings the idea of idolatry much closer to home. In our time and place we do not have much of a temptation to worship some pagan god. But when idolatry includes excessive desires for created things such as money or things,

we will have to admit that we are guilty of having other gods in all kinds of ways.

I want to show you another way that the NT refers to breaking the first commandment. A number of times it speaks of serving something other than God. One of the ways that the Bible speaks of having God as our God is using the idea of service. We are to serve God alone. We are not to serve idols. Jesus uses this kind of language to point to money as an idol in Luke 16:13. ¹³"No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."

This is the language of the first commandment. To have God as our God is to serve him. To have another god as our god is to serve it. Jesus here says that we can't serve two masters. We can't serve the true God and an idol at the same time. We can only be devoted to one God/god at a time. And so, we can serve money. Money can be our master.

This sheds some new light on the way that we relate to either the true God or the other gods. We relate to them as servants to a master. Whether we serve the true God or whether we serve other gods, he or they are our masters and we are servants. And Jesus is saying that if we serve money, money is our master.

But what does this mean? How can money be our master? Well Jesus tells us in this verse. He says that whatever we love and are devoted to is our master. If we love and are devoted to God, he is our master. And if we love and are devoted to money, it is our master.

This is interesting and very important. If we have an excessive love for money, we feel like money is our servant. Money gives us power to do the things that we want to do. We feel like we are the master and money is the servant. We think that money serves us. But Jesus is saying that that is not so. If we are more devoted to money than we are to God, we have actually been mastered by money so that we are its servants. This is the nature of things according to Jesus. We are always servants of some god. This is how we were designed by God. This is what part of what it means to be made in the image of God. We are not gods. We are created to be servants of God, but as fallen sinful human

beings we do not lose our essential nature as servants. So, if we do not serve God we will be servants of something else. We are never masters. We are always servants. There is nothing else that we can be, no matter what we think.

So, if we love money more than God, money is our master and we are its servant. It means that we are devoting our lives to something that is not the true God. We are living our lives for something that is part of the creation instead of the one who is greater than the whole creation. If we are living for money, we are living for something that is finite rather than infinite like God is. We are living for something that has very limited significance. For what is money? It is useful as a tool, but not satisfactory as a god. With money we can buy the things that we need. With money we can have some earthly enjoyment. Money can give us some earthly status. But money cannot give us the sense that we are living for something worthwhile. Money does not function well as the meaning of our lives because it is not meant to be the meaning of our lives. It is meant to be a tool to be used by us, but it is not important enough and significant enough to be served as a god. In the end money cannot be for us what God can be for us. It cannot be something that is worth living for.

Compare serving God with serving money. God is the infinite and eternal creator God whom we were created to worship and serve. When we worship and serve God there is a perfect fit between what we do and what we were designed to do. We were designed to find joy and satisfaction and meaning in serving God. Serving God is supremely worthwhile because the glory of God is the very purpose of the creation. The greatest good is the glory of God. The most worthwhile thing is the glory of God. Nothing is more important. Nothing is more meaningful. Nothing is more valuable. Having God as our master and devoting our lives to serving him and enjoying him is the only way that we can give ourselves to something that matters in an ultimate sense and therefore it is the only thing that can truly satisfy our hearts.

And serving money can never do that. The satisfactions that money can give us are temporary and superficial. Money can give us pleasures, but it is not big enough or significant enough or worthwhile enough to give

meaning to our lives. Money is not glorious like God is glorious. And so, to have money as our master is to live a life that will ultimately be disappointing because it can't bear the freight of satisfying our hearts. It is not important enough to be the meaning of our lives. It is a created thing just as we are. It is not a divine thing and so it is not worthwhile enough to be the meaning of life for humans that were created for so much more – to be filled to the brim with fulfillment by devoting ourselves to the glory of God.

So, we have seen that breaking the first commandment is worshipping and serving the creature instead of the creator. We have seen that breaking the first commandment includes coveting and greed. And we have seen from Jesus' teaching that breaking the first commandment includes being a servant to something in the creation such as money.

There are a couple other verses that speak about breaking the first commandment in a slightly different way. In Philippians 3:18-19, Paul is speaking about some people who were enemies of the cross of Christ. And one of the things that he says about these people is "their god is their belly." He says something similar in Romans 16:18 where he is speaking about unbelievers and he says, "For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites." He is saying the same thing in two different ways. "[T]heir god is their belly," and they serve "their own appetites."

This is another way of speaking of having another god besides the true God. We can make a god of our appetites, our hungers and our cravings. We can make a god of pleasure. We can make a god of sex. We can make a god of eating. We can make a god of comfort. We can make a god of entertainment. We can make a god of recreation. We have desires and appetites for all kinds of things. They are not all wrong. Many of them are perfectly legitimate. God has created us with all kinds of desires. But the problem is when satisfying these desires become too important to us so that the meaning of our lives is about satisfying these desires.

If the true God is our God, then serving and pleasing him is our greatest desire and we enjoy God's gifts in moderation while being grateful to God. But if we make a god of our appetites and desires then satisfying

them is more of a focus and priority than serving God is and so our life is dominated by serving our appetites.

Again, this is a substitution of some created thing for the Creator. We are made to find our greatest satisfaction in God. Jesus teaches us that one of the great things that he does for those who follow him is to satisfy their spiritual hunger and thirst that is built into us.

Think of the story of Jesus and the woman at the well told in John 4. Jesus asks the women to give him a drink and in the conversation that follows he tells her that if she had asked he would have given her living water. And this is what Jesus says about the living water. John 4:13–14, ¹³“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Later on, in John, Jesus identifies the living water with the Holy Spirit which he will give to those who believe in him. But his point here is that through receiving the Holy Spirit who renews our hearts to worship and serve God that we experience the satisfaction of our desires in a way that no created thing can satisfy. Jesus says that those who drink physical water will thirst again. That is how it is with our physical appetites. Any satisfaction of them is temporary. We have our fill and an hour later we are thirsty again. Jesus promises that the satisfaction that he gives will be permanent. The Holy Spirit within us is like a “spring of water welling up to eternal life.” Like all things this side of glory, we experience the beginning of that now with the complete fulfillment after this life if we are followers of Jesus Christ.

So, the first commandment also forbids us from making gods of our appetites. Our appetites can be the other gods that we have before the Lord. We can make gods of our appetite for food and drink and pleasure and comfort and so many other things. Again, many of these things are legitimate when they are indulged with moderation. The problem is when they become gods so that they are far more important to us than the God who is to be the dominant figure in our lives.

So, we have some things to think about. We have other gods when we worship created things rather than the Creator. We have other gods when we covet and are greedy – when we have excessive desires for money and things. We have other gods when money is our master, or any created thing is our master. We worship other gods when we live for our appetites.

How do we know where we are worshipping other gods? We know by self-examination. We know by standing back and evaluating our lives. We know by examining our priorities. We know by noticing what occupies our minds. We know by comparing how passionate we are about created things with how passionate we are about the Creator and his glory. We know by how we spend our money and how we spend our time. We know by considering how we control our appetites or how we don't control them. We know by seriously and thoughtfully considering the question, what am I really living for? What makes me tick? What are my deepest longings? What are my greatest joys? What makes my life worth living? What are my most important goals? What are my most persistent thoughts?

If we seriously think these things through, we will find that we are constantly breaking the first command. If we are believers there will be something of loving God and seeking to live our lives for him. All of God's people have a beginning of the obedience that God requires of us and which is the way of life. 1 John 2:3 says, "And by this know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments." But he also says in 1:8 "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

We are all breakers of the first commandment. We all worship and serve other gods. We all worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator. If we are Christians, we will recognize this and fight against it and seek to be more passionate about God and less passionate about things that are too important to us. Thankfully, there is forgiveness in Jesus Christ. 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." We are all guilty of breaking the first commandment. But there is forgiveness in Jesus for those who repent and embrace him as saviour and Lord.

But God has given also the first commandment to us not only to convict us of our sin and to drive us to Christ. He has also given it to us as a law that he expects us to obey to some extent in this life. Jesus came not only that we might be forgiven, but also that we might experience the blessedness of obedience. We have seen through our meditations on this commandment that idolatry is empty and unsatisfying while having God as our God is the way of blessing and fulfillment. Through Jesus and the power of the Spirit we can have that. A life focused on God is to be truly alive. Remember what Jesus said to the woman at the well.

“[W]hoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Jesus gives the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit gives us the strength to turn from our idols and begin to have God as our God. That is the way of life. That is the way of eternal life. And we can grow in it by taking control of our minds and our hearts and by using the means that God has provided for our spiritual growth.

At the very end of his first epistle the apostle John writes these words. 1 John 5:21, ²¹“Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” He gives this exhortation because he knows that his readers who are trusting in Christ can keep it. Not perfectly but really. They can keep it because of the renewal that is in Christ. And it comes to us in the same way. “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”