

No other gods. Period!

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a six-part series

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Exodus 20:2-6 (Common English Bible)

²I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

³You must have no other gods before me.

⁴Do not make an idol for yourself—no form whatsoever—of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. ⁵Do not bow down to them or worship them, because I, the LORD your God, am a passionate God. I punish children for their parents' sins even to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me. ⁶But I am loyal and gracious to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

1 Kings 11:1-8 (CEB)

In addition to Pharaoh's daughter, King Solomon loved many foreign women, including Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites. ²These came from the nations that the LORD had commanded the Israelites about: "Don't intermarry with them. They will definitely turn your heart toward their gods." Solomon clung to these women in love. ³He had seven hundred royal wives and three hundred secondary wives. They turned his heart. ⁴As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods. He wasn't committed to the LORD his God with all his heart as was his father David. ⁵Solomon followed Astarte the goddess of the Sidonians, and Milcom the detestable god of the Ammonites. ⁶Solomon did what was evil in the LORD's eyes and wasn't completely devoted to the LORD like his father David. ⁷On the hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a shrine to Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and to Molech, the detestable god of the Ammonites. ⁸He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods.

We don't worship idols. Right??

The Israelites have arrived at Mt. Sinai and stand before the slopes of this holy mountain. And so God begins to set forth his Law, his Instruction. This is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is the God who had, at an earlier time, revealed himself to Moses at Mt. Sinai near a bush that burned without being consumed by the flames. This is the God who will now begin to shape these people into a faithful community, a holy nation. This God's name is YHWH or "I am."¹

"No other gods"

The first instruction God gives them is that they are to worship no other gods. Why bother with such a prohibition? Because the Israelites live in a world saturated with deities of all kinds, various gods and goddesses in endless variety. The Israelites might think they have the best god on the block, but they certainly don't think that YHWH is the only god. They will have to be taught this, for even the wise King Solomon facilitates the Israelites' worship of many false gods. Indeed, what ought to be final lesson will come when Elijah confronts the priests of Baal on the slopes of Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18). Sadly, even after Mt. Carmel the Israelites still often revert to the worship of other gods and goddesses.

We may consider ourselves to be monotheists, long past any notions of paganism. But is that really so? N. T. Wright suggests that many in the West still worship three ancient pagan deities: Aphrodite (sex), Mammon (money), and Mars (war). We might argue otherwise, but I wonder if an alien from another planet would agree with Wright after spending some time observing us.

¹ God reveals his name to Moses at the burning bush. God's name is YHWH. You never see this in your Old Testament because Jews would not pronounce God's name, so they said *adonai*, "Lord," instead. In our English translations, we carry on this tradition by printing LORD (in the small caps) every time God's name is used in the Hebrew text.

“Do not make an idol”

In addition to the warnings about worshipping other Gods, YHWH instructs his people that they are to make no idols, no graven images of God or anyone else. We’ve talked about worshipping idols before. And every time we turn to the topic, I find myself making the same mistake – thinking of idols as a matter of priorities. As if God is saying to the Israelites, “Put me first.” But that isn’t really it at all. This business of idols may seem an ancient problem. After all, who among us has figurines of various deities in our curio cabinet? But the worship of idols is an ever-present problem even in our twenty-first culture.

Because this topic is such a challenge for me, I turned where I often do when I need a new and deeper direction, to Eugene Peterson. Here is a bit of what he had to say about idols in his book, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: a conversation in spiritual theology*:

- Idolatry is “reducing God to a concept or object that we can use for our benefit.”
- “Idolatry is using God, not worshipping God.”
- “An idol is god with all the God taken out. God depersonalized, God derelationalized, a god that we can use and enlist and fantasize without ever once having to (maybe ‘getting to’ is the better phrase) receive or give love, and then to go on to live, however falteringly, at our most human. The essence of idolatry is depersonalization. The idol is a form of divinity that requires no personal relationship. The idol is a form of divinity that I can manipulate or control. The idol reverses the God/creature relationship: now I am the god and the idol is the creature.”

I may not have thought of idolatry in that way, but that is definitely the biblical view. Idolatry is not about the priorities in my life, but how I think about God and how I relate to God.

Pagan idols

Read again God’s teaching on idols: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I the LORD your God am jealous God . . .” (Exodus 20:4-5a, NRSV)

Such idols were usually crafted figurines of various sizes and materials which represented gods of varying functions. Some brought fertility, some rain, others harvests, and so on. Ancient people devised rituals to call upon these gods to deliver what the people needed and desired.

Since we humans have always had a wide assortment of needs and wants, there were numerous such gods and their material representations, the idols.

The truth is that this isn’t too far removed from some advice I was once given on how to sell a house fast: (1) buy a figurine of a certain Roman Catholic saint, (2) bury it in the front flower bed, face up with the feet pointing to the street (or was it the other way around?), and (3) stand back and watch the offers roll in.

You’re probably thinking to yourself, how silly, I’m glad I never reduce God to some sort of good luck charm or real estate agent. Or do I? Are there ways in which we unknowingly diminish the Lord God to a god that suits our purposes and serves our needs. The way to begin to grasp what idolatry means for us is through a couple of examples.

Could work be an idol?

Here’s Peterson again:

- “Along the way [of our Christian journey] the primacy of God and his work in our lives gives way ever so slightly to the primacy of our work in God’s kingdom. . . . It

usually takes a long time for the significance of the shift to show up. But when it does it turns out that we have not so much been worshipping God as enlisting him as a trusted and valuable assistant . . . Why not ask God to help us in our work? He invited us to, didn't he, when he said, 'Ask and you shall receive . . .' ? Well, yes, he did. The problem is that, taken out of the context of the wonder of creation and resurrection, any prayer soon becomes an act of idolatry, reducing God to what I can use for my purposes, however noble and useful."

Ouch! Reducing God to my valuable helper as I pursue my noble and good work. You can imagine that someone with a lot of business training and experience, as I have, could easily fall into such idolatry. In business, too often everything and everyone becomes a tool used to accomplish a goal. People become what they can do rather than who they are, they become tools rather than persons.

Do I really use God? Sadly, I'm sure that I often try to do just that, removing myself from, as Peterson puts it, the wonder of creation and resurrection.

Here's another: could success be an idol?

Let's face it, we all seek success. And we often define it as something like this: getting straight-A's and making the varsity, keeping a well-paid job with good benefits, staying happily married to one person for your whole life, having well-adjusted children who are themselves successful, staying thin, and, of course, the big house and SUV.

When I change the word from "success" to "greatness," we may begin to feel some discomfort, but who doesn't want to be a great mom or dad or have a great career or live in a great neighborhood. We have trouble even entertaining (pun intended) the notion that there may be something wrong here. After all, success and even greatness are the American dream, to which we've now added celebrity. It is all just very . . . well, seductive.

But when we turn to the Bible, to the four gospels, we quickly discover that Jesus very often warns the wealthy and powerful about the dangers of their success. Why? Because such success can feed our delusions of self-reliance and independence. Wealth and status can cause us to believe our own press, that we actually are kings of the world. But the path of discipleship leads us toward the recognition that we are dependent upon God, that all our treasured stuff and the success that bought it, is a gift from God. This is why many Christians come to true faith in Christ at a difficult time, when it seems that we've been afflicted by life, when all our delusions of independence have been shattered. With apologies to James Cameron, there is only one king of this world and that is Jesus.

But, what does any of this have to do with idolatry. Do our conceptions of success really feed idolatry? Here is an exercise. Read the following list and substitute the word "success" everywhere there is an "X":

- X sustains me
- X encourages me
- X comforts me
- X lifts me up
- X strengthens me
- X is with me everywhere

You might try "recognition" or "admiration" – which, for many, is what they mean by success or greatness. I remember a very wealthy business associate telling me that his lifelong pursuit wasn't really the money or even what it could buy – the money was merely a way of keeping score. He simply loved to win and wanted to be seen as the biggest winner of all. His self-perception as a "winner" sustained him, encouraged him, comforted him, and so on. For him, that was success.

Now go back to the list and substitute “God.” There are many verbs we associate with God that, in truth, we more readily apply to success or wealth or our possessions or any of a host of things that we feel sustain us, encourage us, and so on. God sometimes just seems so darn remote.

But look again at the list. What’s missing? How about:

- X loves me
- X forgives me

I’m sure that even my business friend wouldn’t try to say that his reputation as a winner “loved” him or “forgave him.” It is the intensely *personal* nature of love and forgiveness that is missing from work, success, or the other idols we’ll talk about in this series. We make idols of success or anything else because we begin to imagine that they provide us with what we think we most need. And of course, they can’t. Success or greatness or achievement will never love you. But we were created to love and to be loved. It is why any of us are here. When Jesus is asked to sum up the Law of Moses, he does so by turning to two instructions, one from Deuteronomy, “Love the Lord your God,” and one from Leviticus, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love God and love neighbor – that’s the center of it all. This is not a surprise, for God is love.

In closing, here’s a bit from Martin Luther on idolatry:

“What is it to have a God? What is God? The answer: a God is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a God is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart. As I have often said, the trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true God. On the other hand, if your trust is false and wrong, then you have not the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your god. The purpose of this commandment, therefore, is to require true faith and cling to him alone. The meaning is: “See to it that you let me alone be your God and never seek another.” In confidence of the heart, fly straight to the one true God and his words: “Whatever good thing you lack, look to me for it and seek it from me, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, come and cling to me. I am the one who will satisfy you and help you out of every need. Only let your heart cling to no one else.” (*The Large Catechism*, 9)²

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In this study, I’ve shared some of my own struggles with this topic of idols and idolatry. I’m convinced that it is important and more challenging than we think. In what ways have you always thought of idols? Have you ever considered yourself an idolater, i.e., a worshiper of idols? I suggest that it has to be more than simply the ordering of my priorities and focus. Do you agree? If so, why? You might go back and re-read what Peterson has to say and put it in the context of the “house-selling saint.” In what ways do you reduce God to a trusted and valuable assistant?
2. Who doesn’t ask God for help and guidance? We all do. Peterson suggests that it is the context in which we come to God that matters so much. He argues that we need to come to God in a context of sheer wonder . . . wonder at God’s creation and God’s rescue of his creation. I think I see what he means. Living in right relationship with God certainly implies that I appreciate and live within the beauty and truth and wonder of God and his creation. Thus, if I’m truly living with God in the right relationship, then I come to him for help as the creature, not the pseudo-creator. You might try to put this in your words. Do you think it is the context of our prayers that matter so much? Perhaps another way to say it is that we need to live within God’s will and purposes if we are going to avoid reducing God to a mere helper of our purposes.

² Quoted in Hauerwas, Stanley; Willimon, William H. (2010-08-01). *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (p. 29). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

Daily Bible Readings

Much of our problem with idolatry lies in the many attractions and pleasures of this world. The book of Ephesians lifts our eyes to the Cosmic Christ and speaks to the practicalities of living as newly transformed people. Thus, we are going to read through this letter by Paul in the coming days. We are going to read at a slow pace . . . so take the time to chew on God's word.

Monday, Ephesians 1:1-14 Paul's salutation; spiritual blessings in Christ	Tuesday, Ephesians 1:15-23 Paul's prayer
Wednesday, Ephesians 2:1-10 From death to life	Thursday, Ephesians 2:11-22 One in Christ
Friday, Ephesians 3:1-13 Paul's ministry to the Gentiles	Weekly Prayer List

