

"I am the LORD Your God"

Baal. Asherah. Chemosh. Ashtoreth. Milcom. Molech. Marduk. These are just a few of the pagan gods of the ancient Near East that Israel would have been acquainted with. In other words, Israel was faced with quite a number of other so-called gods around them. It's this reality to which that the first and second commandments boldly speak. The nation of Israel is being commanded something very radical here. They were being commanded to have one and only one God. None of the other so-called gods could be their God. Nor could they even worship their one true God in a way that looked like how the other gods were worshipped: through man-made idols. And so make no mistake. Israel was being called to an exclusive religion, to worship one and only one God who claimed to be the creator of the heavens and the earth. The gods of the other pagan nations were basically all polytheistic, happy to co-exist with other gods. But not Israel's God. Right here in the first two commandments, something far more unique and exclusive is being required of Israel.

And this is what God calls us to today as well. Marin county and the Bay Area is not that much different than the ancient Near East. As Christians if we look to follow these two commandments, we are going to be seen as trying to be exclusive. But that's because these two commandments are exclusive. We are to worship only the one true God; the other gods are actually false gods. And we are to worship him only in the way he commands us to, not according to however the world makes up. Do you see how exclusive these commands are? God says to not follow all the other religions' claims to divinity. No, the one true God instead says, "I am the LORD your God." Follow me and me only. And follow me in the way that I tell you to follow me. That's what we'll be looking at today as we study the first two of the Ten Commandments.

The first commandment is in verse 7. Very simple. "You shall have no other gods before me." Of course, you have to read this in light of the previous verse. The previous verse identifies who is talking. You see, this is not some general principle of monotheism. The commandment doesn't say, you shall only have one god, in contrast to having multiple gods, as if it doesn't matter who that god is, as long as you only have one. No, this is saying that there is one specific God who was to be Israel's God.

This specific God is identified in verse 6. This is the preamble to all the Ten Commandments, but it is especially fitting right before the first commandment. It identifies this specific God as the LORD, Yahweh in the Hebrew, the personal name of God given in the Bible. It is Yahweh who is to be their God. The LORD God who brought them out of Egypt, out of slavery. This specific God - he and he alone is to be their God.

They had already learned so much about this God. The books before Deuteronomy contain the record of what the LORD God had already done. This is the LORD God who created the heavens and the earth. No other god had done this. This is the LORD God who created man and woman in his image. No other god had done this. This is the LORD God who had sent the flood to destroy almost all humanity when they were full of wickedness. This is the LORD God who had revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; who promised blessings and mercy to them and their offspring; that through their offspring, God would bring blessings to the entire world. No other god had done these things. That's because there is no other God. God is God

alone. Before time began, he existed. Everything that's here, he made. He alone controls all things. So who else could be God? If there was some other god, what would make him a god, if the LORD God alone did all these things?

Now this first commandment here doesn't make an explicit case for monotheism, but it does clearly imply it. Clearly other Scriptures make this clear, as I've just alluded to. But, the first commandment doesn't say there is only one true God to worship. But it says that we should have no other gods besides this one specific God who's done all these great things. It doesn't explicitly make a case right here that there are no other gods. But I think that's the wisdom of this commandment. This commandment actually assumes the existence of things that could be placed as a god in our life. And isn't that the truth? We know firsthand that other things can become false gods to us. Whether it's the false world religions or just the things we setup as gods in our life. These things all look to take away the glory and worship that's due to the one true God alone.

And so this commandment doesn't explicitly make a case for monotheism, but it certainly is implied. And practically speaking, following this command would result in monotheism. If you set the LORD God as the only God in your life, then that is, practically speaking, monotheism. But I hope you see that this commandment is saying more than just monotheism. It's not just about picking only one God to worship. It's about worshipping the right God. The God that's actually God. The God that not only brought Israel out of Egyptian slavery, but the God who also sent his son Jesus to bring us out of the slavery of sin.

Let's look now at the second commandment. "You shall not make for yourself any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them." I think we often miss the context here and don't appreciate what's distinct about this commandment. I think we often think that the second commandment is about not worshipping false gods, i.e. idols. But that's actually the first commandment. The first commandment told us not to have other gods before our God. The second commandment is about how we worship the one true God. We shouldn't worship him through man-made idols. You see, that's what the other nations did. They worshipped their gods by creating idols to represent them, and then they worshipped their gods through those idols. They didn't think those idols actually were the gods themselves, but when they made those idols that somehow thought their gods would become present and available through those idols.

And so the second commandment is not a restriction against other gods; that was the first commandment. The second commandment is a restriction of worshipping the one true God through idols. Israel, and us, are not to make images or statutes that represent God and then worship God through those things. This of course reminds of what we read in chapter 4. The second commandment was discussed a lot in that chapter. Just look back at chapter 4 verses 15-16. Moses tells the people to not make idols because they saw no form at Mount Horeb. They saw and heard God speak from the fire on Mount Horeb. But they saw no form, no visual image of God. Thus, they were not to make an idol to represent God. Chapter 4 goes on to say that this is what all the other nations do. They either take things from the earth or from the heavens and worship their gods through them. Again, you see in chapter 4 more clearly what's here in the second commandment. They were not to make idols of their God. The second commandment is about *not* worshipping God through idols.

For us this might seem hard to fathom: how Israel or anyone could ever make an idol and then claim to worship the one true God through it. But don't forget the golden calf incident with Aaron. That's exactly what happened when Aaron made the golden calf for the people to worship in Exodus 32:4. Aaron said of the golden calf,

"This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt. When later King Jeroboam made the two golden calves for the northern kingdom of Israel, he told them the same thing. Both of these incidents were very direct violations of the second commandment. They made golden calves and attempted to worship the one true God through them. They weren't trying to worship other gods. They were trying to worship the one true God in the wrong way.

And so when we think about a commandment, we have to think about what it prohibits and about what it requires. For example, the first commandment, very simply *prohibits* any devotion given to false gods and *requires* worship of the one true God. But what about the second commandment? Well, generally speaking, the second commandment *prohibits* false worship of God, and *requires* that we properly worship God. We can think about this very narrowly, or more broadly. Very narrowly, we can think about this just in terms of idolatry. Don't worship God through idols. That's what it clearly prohibits. But the broader principle is that this means that God will tell us how to worship him. It not only prohibits worshipping him in certain ways, but it also requires that we worship him in ways that he does command. Obviously the Ten Commandments are a rather brief summary of God's moral laws, and so they don't get into too many details here. The right worship of God in verse 10 is basically summarized as loving God and keeping his commandments. But certainly rest of the book of Deuteronomy will go on to give us more laws about how God wanted to be worshipped. Certainly books like Leviticus really flushed this out too, how God wanted to be worshipped under the old covenant. All the offerings, sacrifices, and feasts, for example. And certainly in the new covenant we see plenty of descriptions of how to and how not to worship God; like we're called not to worship in a specific place anymore (i.e. Jerusalem), but instead to worship in Spirit and in truth. We're called to pray to him, to praise him, to proclaim his word, to administer the sacraments, etc.

In other words, we must worship God the way he tells us to. Theologically, we call that the Regulative Principle of Worship. And so we don't worship him through mindless eastern meditations or mantras, for example, because he's not told us to worship him in that way. We do look to base both our worship on the Word of God. We don't worship God based on our imagination or by taking from the practices of other false religions. God knows what pleases him. And so we worship him in the ways he tells us to. That's really at the heart of the second commandment.

Just consider the reasoning given here in verse 9. This is the rationale God gives for the second commandment, but it certainly applies to the first commandment as well. The LORD God is a jealous God. Jealousy is often seen today as a bad thing. But there is such a thing as a righteous jealousy. You can think of a jealous husband, in a good sense. If someone's wife cheats on him, or even gives improper devotion to another man, then that husband is right to be jealous. Well, right here we see that God has a righteous jealousy. God is right to be jealous when his people worship idols. And he's right to be jealous when we worship other gods.

I think this really shows the heart of the problem with worshipping God via idols. No matter how you try to explain it, the one true God is not an idol, and he does not want to be represented by an idol. And so when someone tries to say this golden calf represents God, he is jealous for his glory. That idol can't possibly represent God and his glory. God has not authorized images to be made of him. Nor does he want to be worshipped through images. Any such image made of him effectively in his eyes becomes something that steals the glory away from himself. But God deserves our all: our complete devotion and worship, rightly given to him, not anything that he created. And so he calls that action right here "iniquity." Sin, in other words.

And notice how this sin impacts those around us. It has ramifications to the third and fourth generations it says here, verse 9. Now this is a very misunderstood verse. Often people think that it means that God will punish the next generations for the sins of their fathers. That's not right. Deuteronomy 24:16 says, "Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall the children be put to death for their fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin." You see, God qualifies his judgment here against the next generations. He's not talking about judging all of the children, but it says "of those who hate me." If any in the next generation hate God, then God will judge them too. And so this isn't describing some generational sin, where sin's effects and punishment get passed down to the next generation. This is describing the generational *migration* of sin. In other words, the sins of the fathers, often become the sins of the children. The sin migrates to them, so to speak, because they follow in the footsteps of their fathers. We'll see in Deuteronomy several times how important it is to pass on the faith to the next generations. Well when the opposite of that happens, when sin happens instead, it's often the sin that gets passed on to the children. That's what God's talking about here. The sin of the parents affects the children, in that it sets a pattern of *not* following God. Just think about it; if all the children know about is worshipping idols, and they never learn anything else, how will they escape this sin themselves? God says here that idol worship is effectively hating God. And so these children so often will end up hating God just as their fathers did who broke this commandment.

But look at the wonderful contrast in verse 10. It's good news. God is not only a jealous God. But he's also a merciful God. The word here for showing mercy in the Hebrew is *hesed*; it's a rich word that can also be translated covenant faithfulness, or steadfast love. And so notice the contrast. If he brings judgment to those who hate him to the third and fourth generations, he brings mercy to *thousands* to those who love him and keep his commandments. The number of thousands here is obviously not intended to be a literal precise number. It's just expressing the contrast. God's love and mercy triumphs over his judgment. He is gracious and quick to forgive those who call out to him and seek after him.

And yet look at the conditions here. God visits judgment upon those who hate him. And he shows mercy to those who love him and keep his commandments. Those are basically the only two options that are listed here. You either love him and keep his commandments, or otherwise you hate God. And so I guess the question becomes for each of us, do we love God or do we hate God? If so, this would suggest that loving God means that we should be keeping his commandments. Well herein lies both the bad news and the good news. The bad news is that we know we don't keep his commandments. We want to say that we love him, but we know we don't fully keep his commandments. That would seem to put us in the category of then hating God, because we don't keep his commandments as we ought. But the good news is that there is Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Jesus Christ we know perfectly loved God and perfectly kept the commandments. In John 14:31, Jesus says that he does as the Father commanded him so that the world may know that he loves the Father. Jesus perfectly loved God and kept his commandments. That's the thing we know we need to do, but it's the thing we know we fall short of. But scripture tells us that if we place our faith in Jesus, then these things belong to us. Jesus' righteousness is ours. It's as if we had his love and his law-keeping. That's how God sees us if we've turned to Jesus in faith. We then receive his steadfast love, his mercy, his covenant faithfulness if we belong to Jesus. His wonderful mercy is abundantly poured out upon us. Believe in Jesus. That's the starting point when approaching these first two commandments, and really all the commandments. And then with that foundation, let's indeed look to respond in love. To really show forth our love for God by a heartfelt striving

to keep his commandments. And he by our mercy will grow us as we strive in this way.

We can think about his mercy in Christ in one more way here. Remember the second commandment says that God has not authorized us to make images of himself. And yet we do know that God authorized man to be his image here on earth. Man and woman were created in the image of God. We can get a glimpse at God's image, only by looking at man! Isn't that amazing? But of course we know that our sin has marred that image. That's why we look around and don't see people being a very good image of their creator. But then God sent the perfect image of himself, his eternal Son, who took on human flesh, in the person of Jesus, born of Mary. And it's in the work of Jesus in our life, that he begins to restore that marred image inside us. As Jesus is washing us clean, he's renewing us in the image of God. That more and more we can begin to reflect that which we had previously lost. That we can be an image of God on earth to others! Yes, we know that we image God so imperfectly at this point. But we look for Christ to keep growing us in this image. And so saints, this is the only authorized image of God we have today: God's people. As we are renewed more and more into the image of God, people get a glimpse of who God is. We have been called to be an image of God, and thus be witnesses to this one true God.

Saints of God, I hope you recognize how relevant these two commands are for us. I started out our sermon today by telling you how relevant these were for Israel. But these two commandments are still very relevant for us today. Allah. Buddha. The Goddess of the Earth. Vishnu. The list can go on and on. Different so-called gods that are alive in people's minds and words today. And all the countless religions in this world: Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, the Bahai Faith, Ancestor Worship, Confucianism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, Universal-Unitarians, Wicca, Rastafarians, New Age Spiritualism, and so many more. You are kidding yourself if you think the Bible is compatible with all these other so-called gods and other religions. This passage right here tells us otherwise. These first two commandments spoke very clearly to Israel. There is only one specific God they were to worship, *not* all the other gods that the other nations around them claimed. And they were not to worship God in the ways that all the pagan nations worshiped their gods; they are to worship the one true God in the way he says to. Do you see the clear picture? God's not saying here to find the truth in all the world religions. God's telling them the truth right here. These other gods and religions are false. Follow him and him alone. Serve him according to his instructions. That's the application for Israel, and it so directly applies to us today. All these other so-called gods are *not* God. We are *not* to worship them. And we are not to integrate the ways that these other religion do their worship into our faith. No, we worship the one true God, and we are to worship him as he tells us. Yes, this is an exclusive claim. But it's the biblical claim.

Now to many of us, this might seem like a simple truth that you take for granted. But I've really tried to drive this home today because it's not something taken for granted in this area anymore. In fact, it's actually the opposite that's taken for granted. What seems to prevail in the North Bay here is a spirit of universalism. There's a growing trend that wants to say that God revealed himself in all these different religions and under these different names. But of course, these first two commandments would disagree with that. And so that would either have to mean that the Bible was not one of the many world religions that God supposedly revealed himself in, or that the Bible is actually correct in its claim that these other world religions are not true. That's not to say that these other world religions might not have elements of truth in them. According to the Bible it would make sense that they did. But fundamentally the Bible challenges that all these other so-called gods are actually false gods and not to be worshipped. My faith is in

the Bible's testimony to the one true God. But I want us all to be aware and on guard against this influence in our society. If you haven't been faced with this influence before, you probably will in the future. Don't believe anyone who tells you that this sort of universalist faith is compatible with the teachings of Scripture. Right at the first two commandments it falls short.

Of course what might be the most pressing application for us as we think about these two commandments is about our own idols of the heart. Colossians 3:5 says that covetousness is idolatry. You see, we so often have strong desires for certain things that end up taking some place in our heart where God should be instead. We can make other things or people god in our life. We setup money or financial stability as a god in our life. We can set up others as god in our life; doing anything for a relationship, or for fame and popularity. You can setup yourself as god, making life all about your honor and image, or even just your convenience. And don't think you have to be a monotheist to struggle in this way; You might not just have one idol of your heart. You might be a polytheist, having multiple idols of the heart. For example, you might serve both the gods of money and convenience. What are your idols of your heart?

Elyse Fitzpatrick wrote a good book about this called *Idols of the Heart*. The book lists a few probing questions to help you discover what things might be the idols of your heart. I'll share them with you right now and I encourage you to think through them and write them down as you reflect on how you keep the first and second commandments. Here's her four questions:

- Question 1: Whom am I worshipping? Who is functioning as my god?
- Question 2: What do I want more than I want to be holy?
- Question 3: What specific commandments have I ignored or disobeyed?
- Question 4: What specific sins do I need to put off? What should I put on in its place?

And of course, sometimes these idols of the heart aren't that visible in our life. They might just lurk in the background of our hearts. But worshipping God demands our all. Beware a divided heart. Any idols in our heart, no matter how prevalent or not, take away from the glory due to God.

And so as we think about these two commandments again today, I'd like to close with a call to repentance. Let us corporately and individually repent today of these idols of our heart and false gods in our lives. Let's be renewed today in our worship and love for the one true God. May we repent and change in these areas by the power of Christ at work in our life. And as we repent again today, be assured of the forgiveness that comes in Jesus. Jesus, the image of the invisible God, is our savior. And it is through Jesus that we can rightly worship God. Amen.

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