

“You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me”
For Our Good Always
Downtown
September 12, 2021

Today marks the first week where we start to tackle the Ten Commandments one by one. This morning we’re starting with number one on the list.

Deuteronomy 5:7

6 “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

7 “You shall have no other gods before me.

Notice that the first command starts with a reminder. A brief history lesson. God reminding them who he is and what he’s done for them. God gave the Israelites the 10 commandments somewhere around 50 days after freeing them from Egypt. And of course in Deuteronomy they are given a second time by way of reminder, but when they first heard these commands, those memories of Egypt were fresh. The Nile river turned to blood, frogs, lice, gnats, diseased livestock, boils, hail, locusts, darkness and death...they weren’t stories from history, they happened less than two months ago. This was after spending 430 years in captivity in Egypt. Which is a pretty long time. This year will be America’s 275th year as a nation. Even if you count the years spent as colonies under the British starting back in the early 1600’s it wouldn’t be as long as the Israelites were in Egypt.

This is a group that doesn’t have their own culture, their own norms, their own laws, their own ways of life. For 430 years they’ve had to live like Egyptians with no other choice. And part of God bringing them out of Egypt involved them leaving behind the ways of Egypt. In fact, the 10 plagues that God sent Egypt in order for Pharaoh to finally release the Israelites weren’t simply random.

- Hapi- Egyptian God of the Nile. Osiris...they believed the Nile was his bloodstream. And God turns the Nile into blood.
- Heket- Egyptian Goddess of Fertility, Water, Renewal . She had the head of a frog. Egyptians views frogs as sacred and never killed them, in fact stepping on a frog was illegal...God overwhelms them with frogs
- Khepri- was often depicted as having the head of a fly. God plagues them with fly’s.
- Hathor- was depicted with the head of a cow. She was the goddess of Protection but all their cows died and nothing could be done to protect them.
- Ra- The Sun God. And God sent Three Days of Complete Darkness
- Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, was worshipped by the Egyptians because he was seen as the embodiment of a god himself. So of course he was seen as the greatest Egyptian God of all and it was believed that his deity passed down through the birth of his firstborn son. And what does YHWH do? Pronounces the death of all firstborn in families who do not use the blood of a lamb for atonement and the first one mentioned is Pharaoh's son.

Each of these is God saying “I am the one true God. Not Ra, not Osiris, and most definitely not Pharaoh.” You want sun for your crops? I created the sun and cause it to rise, I send the rain on the just and unjust alike. You want fertility? I am the giver of life. I form you in your mothers womb. You want cattle? I own the cattle on a thousand hills. It’s God’s way of showing them...your little gods are puny...and in fact, they are empty! In the end, there is nothing there. Trusting in, going to, these false gods to protect you or provide for you is an exercise in futility.

There's actually a branch of OT theology called "polemic theology". Polemic means "verbal or written attack". Basically, it asserts that some of what we see happening in the old testament is something of a direct attack on the other pagan religions and myths of the ancient near East - showing how YHWH is superior in every single way to the gods of these other religions.

Think of it like some parts of the Old Testament are diss track towards false gods, if you're familiar with the rap game. It's God's way of saying "if you think you're so great Osiris, watch how I give your people this virus!" And everyone watching is like "oh snap, don't do him like that God!" And this is what is happening with the plagues - a strategic debunking of the various false gods of the Egyptians.

Through the way God delivered his people, he's giving them a marker to look back on and cling to and remember that Yahweh God is the one true God, He's the one who brought them out of Egypt, who delivered them. He's the one calling for their trust and allegiance. And he's the one saying "no thing and no one comes before me."

I used to hate something my parents would say to me. A phrase. They would tell me to do something. And I would ask "why"? And they would say, because I said so. They said it all the time and I found it frustrating, empty, unilluminating. Lacking insight and clarity and nuance.

When I was a kid I swore I would never say that to my children. If they wanted clarification and insight into my thinking, I would give it to them. My children would know my reasons. My kids are now 3, 6, 9. The other day, I asked one of them to do something. They said "why?" And I cannot tell you how smoothly and effortlessly "Because I said so" rolled off my tongue.

You know what I realize now that I didn't as a child? When I was a kid, My parents loved me more than any other humans in the planet. They sacrificed for me more than anyone on the planet. They served me and helped me more than any human on the planet. And they were way smarter than I was. Because I said so was actually a great reason! My love for you is proven. I've given more of my life to help you than anyone else. Because of who I am and what I've done, the fact that it's me asking is a great reason for you to obey. Because I'm the one who asked you. Because it's me who's asking. That's why you should do it.

You know, this is what Peter says to Jesus when Jesus asks him to do something that Peter thinks is nonsense. His request makes no sense to him. Jesus asks Peter to put fishing nets back out after fishing all night and catching nothing. It's the wrong place, and the wrong time to catch anything now. They didn't even catch anything at the right time and place and this is Peter's profession. He knows what he's doing. So it's a nonsense command on the face of it. But Peter says "because you say so, I will". Jesus because it's you who's telling me to do this, I'll do it. If it were someone else, that's gonna be a "no". But because you said so, I'll do it. Because I know who you are, that's my reason for doing it. Not because of what the command is, but because of the person commanding.

This series is about trying to understand why some of God's commands don't always make sense to us. But don't miss that this isn't entirely the point. You can be a Christian and obey God whether or not his commands make sense to you. In fact, if there is an eternal all knowing God, then there's no way that everything he says and does could possibly make sense to us. We should start with that assumption. He has to say and do things that don't make sense to us because he knows everything and has seen everything and we have not.

So sometimes it's entirely ok for us to obey God because he said to. And he's the one asking. And we know who he is and what he's done for us. He shows who he is first, and it grounds his directions.

as he's commanding them, he grounds the commands in what he's already done and who they already are. This is a biblical pattern, throughout the whole bible. The imperatives are grounded in the indicatives. Old

Testament and New Testament. Who God is, What Jesus has done for us, who we are in Christ comes first, then instruction.

Salvation isn't the reward for obedience and allegiance to God, salvation is the reason for obedience and allegiance to God. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt and proved myself to you. Now that you're out of Egypt, I want you to leave behind the ways of Egypt as well."

And then, the first of the 10 commandments...

7 "You shall have no other gods before me.

The first command is a call to allegiance. In terms of the moral categories we talked about for the last two weeks - it's a command dealing with the **authority and loyalty foundations**. It's a call to ultimate trust and fidelity to the God of the Bible

At first glance it might seem like God is saying "no polytheism" or maybe even "if you are polytheistic just make sure I'm the most important one." No other gods before me. But that's not really what's happening. God has just proven that the Egyptian gods didn't provide, didn't protect, didn't deliver, were not powerful and in fact didn't exist.

We know that because right before this in Deuteronomy 4, God says,

34 Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? **35** To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him.

That phrase "before me" could be translated "in my presence" or "in my face" as well as "first."

So what God is actually saying with the first commandment is "no one and no thing comes before me, in your life. "

And it's interesting that He says, "You shall have no other gods before me" and not something like "You must have a god" or "It's important that you worship some god and it should be me." The first commandment assumes whoever hears the command is worshipping something, and it's a call to worship the true God.

And this insight is one of the keys that unlocks all the riddles of why you are the way you are, why you act the way you act and why you have the problems you do.

Ok let's use some other scriptures to unpack this. Midtown vets will be familiar with these passages. this is a New Testament exposition of the first commandment from.

Romans 1:21–25.

21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. 25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Paul here says that this is something all human beings do. We exchange God for a lie, and we put created things in God's place in our lives. We were meant to look to God for our hope, for our contentment,

provision, identity, and joy and purpose. But instead, each and everyone of us put other things in God's place. Other things become more important to us than God.

And Paul says it is a lie. That any created thing can satisfy, fulfill, provide for, protect us the way that God can. That any created being might be worthy of the worship that only God is worthy of. It doesn't have to be a bad thing. Often we take a good thing and we make it a God thing.

Ok, let me give you a metaphor.

Jeremiah 2:11-13

11 Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. **12** Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, **13** for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

3 ways people used to get water:

1. Live next to a stream/river. Best source of water, but only applied to the ones lucky enough to live near a freshwater stream.

2. Well. Second best option, but only for those rich enough to dig a well. Impractical for most.

3. Cistern. Basically a big pot to catch rainwater. Worst way to get water, because it gets stagnant and nasty very quickly. Ever seen a big basin full of rainwater that's been sitting there for a few days?

So God is saying, "I'm supposed to be your fountain, your stream of living water - but instead of going to the stream, you went out and got a cistern instead, and not even a good one - you got a broken one that can't hold water.

God uses this picture to describe the human condition. Thirst as a metaphor for our inner neediness.

Everyone drinks. This is what it means to be human. You will turn to something to quench your inner thirst. To fill your inner emptiness. Everyone builds their life on something.

There are two options. God, or something else. And whatever that something else is... is a god. Whether you call it by a name or not. God made us for himself. To know him, walk with him, enjoy him, delight in him, be with him. He says that he himself is a fountain of living water. All of life is supposed function like this...we know God and walk with him, find our meaning and joy in him, and then everything falls into place.

God says that our problem is, every single one of us forsake him. And then in our emptiness turn to other things. We look to other things to function as gods to us. To provide us with meaning, contentment, purpose, hope.

This is why the African church father Augustine said "God our hearts will not rest until they rest in you."

Martin Luther in his commentary on the 10 commandments, said that if you never break the first commandment, you'll never break any of the others. Or, you never break any of the others, without breaking the first. Jesus said you can summarize all the commands of the bible with, 'love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.' If you do that, you will never sin. you won't have any desire or need to. everything you need, you will be getting all that you need from God. For example, if you lie. Why do you lie? It's because something has become more important to you in that moment than God. Some success, some approval, some comfort matters more to you in that moment than the acceptance, approval and comfort of God. So you lie to either get something or keep something.

This is why we steal. This is why we covet. Because we've already broken the first commandment. We've already exchanged the truth of God for a lie, we have already forsaken God the fountain of living water and are now looking to broken cistern to do for us what only God himself can do.

Behaviors are symptoms. A genuine delight in God, enjoying him as the living water that he is, will result in behaviors and attitudes like peace, patience, joy, kindness, gentleness, self control.

Failure to enjoy God will result in behaviors and attitudes like anger, worry, selfishness, pride, rebellion, self righteousness, drunkenness, sexual sin...all of these things are symptomatic of forsaking God, the fountain of living water.

Any time we actively sin, something else happened before it. We've turned from God. We've not gone to God as our fountain of living water. We've not gone to God for our hope, joy, happiness, value. And something else is functioning as god in our life.

This is the heart of the first commandment. Most often throughout human history, this has happened concurrently with belief in and worship of false gods.

Throughout human history there have been all sorts of examples of this. Just like in Egypt. For example, in the time of Jesus, there was all sorts of false gods that the Greeks worshipped:

Plutus: goddess of prosperity, money. If you wanted that, you went to his temple and made offerings.

-Athena: the goddess of wisdom; politics.

-Aphrodite: goddess of sexuality, beauty, fertility.

-Nike: the goddess of victory, worshipped by soldiers and athletes and basketball players, who made you run faster, jump higher, and soar above the competition.

-Baucus: god of partying and alcohol.

All these gods were a means to something: prosperity; power; whatever was important to you. They are the means by which we make the exchange, the truth for the lie. We tend to look down our noses at ancient cultures that worship all these different gods like we're advanced and evolved but really we want the same things they wanted, the only difference is that we don't think a deity controls it. They worshipped Artemis and believed she was the giver of material wealth. They didn't want Plutus they just wanted what they thought he could give them. They wanted money. They believed material goods were able to deliver contentment so they worshipped mammon in hopes he would deliver. We don't worship Plutus, but only because we don't think he is the dispenser of material gain. But every bit as much as them we believe that money can deliver contentment.

And Sometimes as moderners, we feel a great amount of cultural distance from polytheistic cultures, places where people are overtly worshipping other gods. That seems foreign to us. May I submit that it's not as foreign as you might initially think? I actually think that if a person from ancient Egypt or ancient Rome showed up here, they would feel right at home.

Football game - That many people chanting the same things, emotionally invested and expressive in ways that nothing else draws out, communally aware and hugging strangers, millions upon millions of dollars being redistributed, wearing the same colors, rituals and songs and sacrifice of time and money and devotion. "Well if win, we will be really happy until next Saturday. And if we lose it's sackcloth and ashes and a time of mourning until next Saturday." We build our schedules around these events...don't you have a wedding on a home game Saturday in the fall. Oh you worship Nike. no no we have made so much progress. No way.

What's little swoosh mark on the other teams jersey there?

To them I don't think they would just think we worshipped Nike the goddess of victory, they would think we'd perfected it.

They would see the obsession we have with buying things, accumulating new and better. They would see that storage units are a multi billion dollar industry because we have more stuff than our houses can even hold. They would see our massive debt as individuals and as a nation, Scrolling through the endless maze that's Amazon in this secret hope that they next purchase, the next transaction, the next package that comes in the mail will make your life just slightly better, more productive, more comfortable than it was before...They would think we don't just worship Plutus the goddess of wealth and prosperity, we have perfected it.

They would head down to 5 points to find where the worshippers of Baucis gather. Athena, the goddess of politics and power and wisdom. Can you even imagine their delight? You mean to tell me that if you want to find out about current events and political happenings, you don't have to go to the city center and wait on a herald to arrive and deliver news...you can just turn on the tv to multiple 24hr news channels totally devoted to analyzing political issues?! You guys are right when you say you are progressive...you have perfected the worship of the gods in ways we could have only dreamed of.

We continue to believe, just like all human beings who have ever lived, that things other than God himself have a kind of salvation power. We're not that different.

But here's the thing... just like the false gods of Egypt, our false gods can't actually do what we want them to do. They are broken cisterns. They're always leaking. They are never enough.

David Foster Wallace was an award-winning, best-selling novelist who committed suicide in 2008. But before his death he gave a famous commencement address in which he said this to the graduating class: "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And ... pretty much anything you worship will eat you alive.

If you worship money and things—if they are where you tap real meaning in life—then you will never have enough

Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you

Worship power—you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay.

Worship your intellect, being seen as smart—you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And so on."

I would add to his list in an effort to offend all of us -

-If you center your life and identity on your spouse or partner, you will be emotionally dependent, jealous, and controlling. The other person's problems will be overwhelming to you.

-If you center your life and identity on your family and children, you will try to live your life through your children until they resent you or have no self of their own. At worst, you may abuse them when they displease you.

-If you center your life and identity on your work and career, you will be a driven workaholic and a boring, shallow person. At worst you will lose family and friends and, if your career goes poorly, develop deep depression.

-If you center your life and identity on pleasure, gratification, and comfort, you will find yourself getting addicted to something. You will become chained to the "escape strategies" by which you avoid the hardness of life.

-If you center your life and identity on relationships and approval, you will be constantly overly hurt by criticism and thus always losing friends. You will fear confronting others and therefore will be a useless friend.

-If you center your life and identity on a "noble cause," you will divide the world into "good" and "bad" and demonize your opponents. Ironically, you will be controlled by your enemies. Without them, you have no purpose.

-If you center your life and identity on religion and morality, you will, if you are living up to your moral standards, be proud, self-righteous, and cruel. If you don't live up to your moral standards, your guilt will be utterly devastating.

-It is not going to work. Nothing created can bear the weight of providing us with identity and meaning, only God can do that.

interview with **Zac Efron**, May 2014, explaining why in his mid 20's he had to check into an alcohol-rehab facility: "I had done films back-to-back-to-back. I was burnt out. There was something lacking, some sort of hole that I couldn't really fill up. I was just so deep into my work, it was really the only thing I had. . . . I mean, you're in your 20s, single, going through life in Hollywood, you know?" No, Zac, I actually don't know.

Jim Carrey - "I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer."

And this is why this first command of God is for our good. It's why it is a beautiful and brilliant command. It is a call to align ourselves with the only things that can truly satisfy - the only one who can ever set us free.

So let me ask a few questions to help you diagnose yourself.

I think this is how you can really drill down on it. To ask yourself questions like:

- What do I long for most passionately? What makes me happiest?
- What do I go to for comfort? - What do I rely on or comfort myself with when things go bad or get difficult?
- How do I explain myself to others? What do I brag about? What do I want to be most known for?
- What do I complain about most? What, if you never got it or it was taken away, would make you resent God or walk away from Him?
- Whose approval am I seeking?

Or another good one is: What am I most afraid of?

- Is your false god the god of power or control, our greatest nightmare is humiliation or uncertainty
- If your false god the god of comfort, your greatest nightmare is stress or demands.
- If your false god the god of approval, your greatest nightmare is rejection.

So I want to invite you this morning to obey the first commandment, for your good.

To trade your false gods for the one true God. Run to God with your broken cisterns and in exchange, you know what God gives you? The righteousness of His Son Jesus.

- If power or control is your god, God says trade in that broken cistern because only I can give you what you really want. I'm in control and I have all the power - and I proved it by sending my Son Jesus to conquer death for you.
- If comfort is your god, God says, "Look I love you and nothing is going to be able to give you the rest you want, only I can do that ... so let my Son Jesus lead beside still waters and find your comfort in me alone.

- If approval is your god, God says “Stop worrying what other people think of you, that’s slavery. Realign your allegiance to me alone and you will know what I’ll call you - my child and I will be your Father. And I will never leave you.

And as if that weren’t enough... other gods are always a means to an ends - Jesus is the only one who is both the means and the end. Worship Him and you get more of Him in return.

He is the only God who won’t let you down. He laid down His life for you. He conquered death for you. He is what your soul needs most and first. He’s the only one who is a fountain of living water. The one true God.

How to discover your counterfeit gods:

Here’s how you can really drill down on it. Ask: What am I most afraid of? What do I long for most passionately? What do I go to for comfort? What do I complain about most? What makes me happiest? How do I explain myself to others? The way people define themselves is usually an indication of what is most important.

What makes you angry at God? Usually, people get angry at God because he fails to provide them with their idols. What do I brag about?

Whose approval am I seeking?

self-reflection questions...

- What other than Jesus has become my main source of significance, happiness, meaning and purpose?
 - What, other than being a child of God, am I using as my primary identity?
 - What have I substituted for Jesus in my life?
 - What have I used to make myself feel accepted or worthy before God, myself, and others?
 - What makes me feel the most self-worth? What am I the proudest of? What do I want to be known for?
 - What do I want to make sure that people know about me fairly early on in the conversation or relationship?
 - What do I really want and expect out of life? What would really make me happy?
 - What do I think most easily about? What does my mind go to when I am free? What preoccupies me?
- What do I daydream about?
- What is my hope for the future?

Another way to discern our “idols” is to take note of what we get emotional about. Our idols are revealed because they arouse powerful emotions when they’re threatened or taken away.

- What do I worry about most?
- What do I rely on or comfort myself with when things go bad or get difficult?
- What, if I failed or lost it, would make me wish I wasn’t alive?
- What prayer, unanswered, would make me seriously think about turning away from God?
- What do I do to cope? What are my release valves? What do I do to feel better?

Control: You know you have a control idol if your greatest nightmare is uncertainty.

Approval: You know you have an approval idol if your greatest nightmare is rejection.

Comfort: You know you have a comfort idol if your greatest nightmare is stress or demands.

Power: You know you have a power idol if your greatest nightmare is humiliation or embarrassment or losing.

You’re going to need something better. Your little gods aren’t working.

The good news is that we aren’t the only ones who have made an exchange. Jesus made an exchange.

Meaning, if control is what you're after, you can never have enough and the pursuit of it will ruin your life...but you are invited to rest in the arms of the one who works all things according to his good purposes.

If comfort has been your god, there is a God in heaven for whom you were created at whose right hand are pleasures forevermore.

If approval is what you've built your life on, you have the Lord of the Universe who says in Christ, he delights in you. God will accept you, who cares what other people think!

If performance has dictated your life, Jesus has performed in your place.

Jesus is the only god who won't let you down, who laid down his life for you. And not just that, but rose from the dead to prove that every word he ever said was true and right.