

No Idols

Exodus 20:4-6

⁴You 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. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

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I have been listening to David McCullough narrate his masterful book 1776 and I have been struck by the trials and traumas that our soldiers and leaders endured in their battle for freedom. We remember and honor their sacrifices and those of following generations in

our words

our memories of them and

living out our national creed that all people are created equal and that we strive for freedom and justice for all.

In this house of prayer, we also remember the war that Jesus fought against the principalities and powers that we might be free from the tyranny of sin and free to live in the promise of faith, hope and love.

It is wonderfully providential that we would be considering the second commandment this day; it seeks our freedom from the tyranny of idols. This commandment sharpens the point of the first commandment - no other gods. Not many people give much thought to the second commandment today. Perhaps it is like the soldier who after hearing his chaplain preach on the ten commandments said, "Well, at least I've never made any graven images."

A couple of correctives so that we can focus on the emphasis of this commandment:

- 1) This scripture speaks of our god being a jealous god. To us, jealousy includes elements of mistrust, suspicion and retribution; the Hebrew is not so toxically tainted. Rather it conveys the characteristic that God allows no rival, no competitor.
- 2) Punishing the children for the iniquity of the parents. I don't know about you, but my children would be seriously maimed if God really sought to bring pain on my children in proportion to my sins. The sins of the parents are picked up, learned and followed by our children, just as they pick up our good traits and are blessed.
- 3) Idols are attractive; they are immediate and trigger our pleasure senses. However, we mistakenly think that they'll provide meaning and security. Often, our idols are good things that we ask more than they can deliver: reading, hobbies, shopping, new technologies, food, sex, sleep. These can bless us, but they cannot save us; we may mistakenly worship them, but they will not be a reliable god for us.

If idolatry is about dancing around a golden calf then I probably only need to talk to a handful of you who have questions about an earlier season when you danced around an aluminum keg.

But Scripture treats the second commandment seriously. Jeremiah warned God's people

For the customs of the peoples are false:
A tree from the forest is cut down,
And worked with an ax by the hands of an artisan:
People deck it with silver and gold;
They fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move.
Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak;
They have to be carried, for they cannot walk.
Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil,
Nor is it in them to do good.¹

That concern is shared by writers of the New Testament as well. At the end of his passionate letter emphasizing faithfulness to God the writer of 1 John ends the entire epistle with this charge "Little children, keep yourself from idols".²

And Jesus himself spoke on the matter of idols:

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.³

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.⁴

There is a fundamental choice which is a given of creation: we will worship the creator and serve God's intentions or we will worship some aspect of creation and serve it. Scripture would teach us that worship of false gods (idols) develops in us a false self and a faulty life.

While we do not dance around golden calves, Scripture understands that there are idols of the heart. Listen to the prophet Ezekiel.

¹Certain elders of Israel came to me and sat down before me. ²And the word of the LORD came to me: ³Mortal, these men have taken their idols into their hearts, and placed their iniquity as a stumbling block before them; shall I let myself be consulted by them? ⁴Therefore speak to them, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Any of those of the house of Israel who take their idols into their hearts and place their iniquity as a stumbling block before them, and yet come to the prophet—I the LORD will answer those who come with the multitude of their idols, ⁵in order that I may take hold of the hearts of the house of Israel, all of whom are estranged from me through their idols.⁵

¹ Jeremiah 10:3-5

² 1 John 5:21

³ Matthew 6:21

⁴ Matthew 6:24

⁵ Ezekiel 14:1-5

Gerald May wrote about addictions as idols.

Addictions are our worst enemies. They enslave us with chains of our own making....
The objects of our addictions become our false gods. These are what we worship, what we attend to, where we give our time and energy, instead of love.

He describes these false gods as a “counterfeit religious presence”.

So while we draw comfort from the 23rd Psalm and say the Apostles’ Creed without great reservation and pray the Lord’s Prayer with heartfelt desire, we must confess that we are confronted with numerous “idols of our hearts” and attend to and give our time and energy to other gods.

How serious is the matter of idols?

Someone once said that we’re infested with idolatries.

John Calvin said that the human heart is “a perpetual factory for idolatries”.⁶

Just to be clear, we’re not talking about worshipping witchcraft or drinking blood or such. Idolatry is taking something from the created world and giving it time, attention and allegiance that are due only our gracious creator.

It’s like a preacher once said, idols are “good things *inappropriately* adored. But when you have Jesus in the center of a room, everything else only junks up the décor”.⁷

Idolatry is fussing with the junk when Jesus is in the center of the room.

We are led to conclude that Scripture’s consistent concern with the second commandment is due to the simple principle that we are shaped by what we worship:

True worship develops the true self
False worship develops false selves and faulty lives.

We hear an example of that simple principle in the outreach efforts of Timothy Keller who ministers to many post-modern non-Christians in New York City. He writes, “I challenge their idolatry of looking to careers and romances to save them which is not only theologically inappropriate but does not lead to love, joy and peace. Because they see their careers and loves as their gods they are more likely to suffer from drivenness, addictions, severe anxiety, obsessiveness, envy of others and resentment.”⁸

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.11.8

⁷ Charles Swindoll, “Moody Monthly”, January 1984, p. 39

⁸ Tim Keller, “Talking About Idolatry in a Postmodern Age”, <http://www.monergism.com/postmodernidols.html>

If Calvin is right that our hearts are perpetual factories for idolatries, then we have our work cut out for us. But if Scripture is right, it is a hopeful diagnosis because it can be treated effectively, even if not fully cured in this life.

Ezekiel, who warned against the idolatries of the heart, also spoke of its treatment.

“This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices!”⁹

As I’ve been preparing my house for sale, I’ve cleaned out my basement, my closets, and my attic. I stand before you as one who has repented from junk and without reservation I renounce “stuff”!

Our culture is a stuff pusher and peddler. One woman who bought a dress on sale had to defend her purchase to her husband said, “They threw it at me!”

Because of the peddling of stuff and my own mistaken notion of needing it, idolizing stuff, I realize how much stuff I’ve had...and surprisingly how little use I’ve made of it. Someone reported that the service life of the average drill in the United States is less than one hour.

Stuff is one idolatry that many of us share.

What I’ve realized is that life is much easier when we have only necessary stuff.

I believe that upon his death, Gandhi owned one garment, glasses, his scripture, and sandals. Doesn’t take long to straighten up the place when that’s all the stuff you possess.

Many others today are now coping with grief over the loss of retirement funds and the corresponding lifestyle and security. Again, it is a good goal that we would want to be independent of our children and not to be a burden to them. And it is desirable that we would not have fear about our future.

But the economic downturn is an opportunity to confront and repent from any idolatry we may have related to money.

Scripture is clear and history periodically bears out

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Sometimes we’re pushed into confronting the idols of our hearts and we can be thankful for that. But Scripture’s call is to a more active response to idols. As John wrote in his first letter, “Keep yourselves from idols.”¹⁰

⁹ Ezekiel 14:6 (NIV)

Here is one strategy for keeping ourselves from idols.

- 1) Stay in love with God and serve God daily knowing that blessing comes from God alone.
- 2) Notice how you spend your time and energy – what do you love too much? What gods are revealed?
- 3) Be bold to spot the inconsistencies between what you believe and how you live. Ask the diagnostic question: what am I serving?

Our call is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And the promise is that we may turn from our idols to the one, true God who alone has the power to save and bless.

Charge to the congregation: Soren Kierkegaard revised a categorical imperative of Immanuel Kant which helps us to chart a steady course in a sea of idols: “Relate thyself absolutely to the Absolute and relatively to the relative.”

¹⁰ 1 John 5:21