

“No Other Gods”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
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New Testament Lesson: 1 Corinthians 8:1-6

Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 20:3-11

When it comes to idolatry, Professor Michael Horton of Westminster Seminary California points to the Apostle Paul’s assertion that “faith is the hope of things unseen. “The essence of idolatry,” he says, “is demanding (a holy) vision, demanding a direct encounter with (God) – demanding that God make me happy right here and now, or demanding that God make me holy right here and now; not being patient. Faith grasps the promise (as revealed in God’s word) says Horton, whereas passion grasps that which (we) can feel and experience and see.”¹

If the Ten Commandments are about anything, they are about this distinction between what we do – or refrain from doing – because of our faith, and what we do or don’t do because of what Prof. Horton calls our passions. God’s word to us is about putting our faith ahead of our passions or our earthly desires.

God makes promises to those who put their “faith first in life, promising to show steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and (who) keep God’s commandments.”

Today and in the weeks to come, we will explore what it means to love God and to keep God’s commandments. God, in placing supreme loyalty as first among the Ten Commandments, says, “You shall have no other gods before me.” God knows that we’re only human, and that as humans we juggle a lot of different areas of life, whether that’s family, schoolwork or our jobs, hobbies and interests; volunteering, church work; not to mention all our possessions, our health and finances, and even our hopes and dreams. God knows we’ve got a lot going on in life. And God says that in all these different areas of life, God comes first. God says this – God commands this – because God knows what happens when we put other things or people or desires or fears or loves ahead of our love of God.

Bad things happen and not only to us, but to others. Bad things get handed down from one generation to the next until we’ve lost touch with who we are as children of God. God knows how terrible this is for us. And sadly, many of us know this too; we know through our past experiences and through the experiences of others just how terrible life can be apart from God. We know this and more importantly, God knows this ..., and so God has taken action to protect us from losing touch with God.

¹ Michael Horton, interviewed by Jamie Lee Rake, "Door Interview: Mike Horton," The Door, March-April 1999, 22.

The Hebrew text that is translated in our Bible as “You shall have no other gods ...” is actually rendered in Hebrew as “there will not be to you” any other gods. Theologian H. Graf Reventlow prefers this original Hebrew phrasing, pointing out that the “no other gods” statement is not as much a command to us as an act of God. Reventlow sees here that God is banishing all other gods from our lives, and thus freeing us from any hold that other people or things or desires or fears or loves may have on us. “....There shall not be to you” any other gods. Did you ever consider that? That God’s command in our lives is actually one of freedom and liberation, in this case liberation from other gods, other loyalties?

Many of you know that several months ago Yuri and I brought a new cat into our household – a stray about a year old. She came into our home after spending the first year of her life out in the cold and snow of last winter – and believe me, her thick coat of fur was evidence of that, along with her ravenous appetite. (She’s affectionately known as the gobbler, but her real name is Tabi or Tabitha.) Anyway, As a part of our family, Tabi has had to get used to a lot of restrictions. She’s no longer aloud to be outside – ever. She has to spend much of the day and all night cordoned off upstairs. (This is so our other cat, the beloved Zeke or Ezekiel, has a chance to eat his food, because he’s a nibbler and it takes him all morning and much of the afternoon just to eat breakfast.

Now you would think that with all these restrictions, Tabi would be feeling very put upon – like she can’t do anything fun anymore. But actually, it’s just the opposite. Tabi is free. She’s free from having to scrounge for every morsel of food, free from being at odds with other animals, free from the fear that she may not make it through another night all alone. In all the restrictions she has, Tabi is free.

Freedom. This is what God seeks to give to us in the Ten Commandments, and particularly in Commandment No. 1. God comes first, and in that, there is freedom.

It’s no accident that God gave the Ten Commandments to the Israelites immediately after liberating them from slavery in Egypt. The Ten Commandments are an extension of their freedom. They are free from having to scrounge for every morsel of food, free from being at odds with Pharaoh, free from not knowing if they will make it through another day. Free, if they but trust in God and allow God to command the highest position in their lives.

Given Reventlow’s translation about God banishing all other gods, when we encounter God’s word to us that says “there will not be to you any other gods,” we do not need to worry about obeying this command. We only need to hear it and trust in it, trust in the good news of God’s supremacy – God’s triumph – over all that we face or encounter in life.

So, if the commandment concerning other gods is not at its core about our temptation to elevate other things above God – if God has declared this to be impossible – then what is at the core of this temptation, this prohibition to have any other gods before the Lord our God?

The temptation – and the danger – is not so much us elevating other things above God, but rather us trying to bring God down to the level of other things. That is possible, you know. Because the God of the exodus is all about freedom and love, God allows us the freedom to love him and embrace him above all else, or not.

Let's look at the Second Commandment before wrapping up for this morning. "You shall not make for yourself an idol ...," says God. Don't try to domesticate me as some statue or painting or image that you can see and control and move from place to place. Do you see how this ties into our temptation to bring God down to the level of other things?

How about the Third Commandment: "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God ..." – don't seek to control God's name. It's the same thing. Don't try to use God's name for some ordinary purpose or, worse yet, a purpose that is contrary to who God is. Don't try to use God to exert your will – our will – Because that's what we would be doing; to utter God's name is to employ – to put into action – the presence and power of God. So if we do so, we'd better be sure it's for God's purpose and not our own.

The Third Commandment, at its core, is not about cursing or using obscenities. It's about not making God who is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, into a means for some other end, into a means for our purpose.

By asserting supremacy in the first three commandments, God is guarding us against the greatest temptation of them all – the temptation to diminish the role of God, either by doing away with God in our day-to-day lives, or leaving God merely for our own personal use, or by making God merely an object of adoration.

The saving grace of all of this is that not only is God active and powerful in our lives and the world, but God is truly beyond all of our self-serving efforts to control and manipulate. God is God and nothing can change that. We don't have to worry about losing track of God – God is always with us. The only thing we have to worry about is lose track of ourselves.

That's the freedom we've been given by the God of the exodus, the freedom to love God and keep to God's word as supreme (the first commandment), and liberating (the second commandment), and sacred (commandment No. 3, God's name is sacred), and to keep to God's word as holy (the fourth commandment; keep the Sabbath holy unto the Lord).

Whether we keep these and the other commandments, whether we keep to God's word or not – and what comes of it for us and for those who follow after us – well, that's your choice, given freely to you and to me – given to us – by the God of the exodus, the God of liberation.

We have been given the freedom to choose, but either way turn in life – make no mistake about it – it is always God who reigns supreme. In light of that reality, let us all choose wisely and keep God's holy word ever before us, for our sake, for the sake of others, and for the sake of our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

We come before you in prayer, loving Creator, and ask that you would help us to be in harmony with you and with all creation.

As we humble ourselves before you, we thank you for the seeds of faith you have planted in us when we were yet little children.

We thank you for the Sunday school teachers, preachers, choir directors and parents who encouraged the growth of your word in us.

Grant us the courage, we pray, to release the things in our lives which choke us and prevent us from growth.

You know what hinders us, loving God; make us aware of our misguided ways and help us to clear a pathway to you – and for you – so that we might welcome you and honor you in all that we do.

And we do invite you into our lives Lord, even as you are already there for us. We pray your healing presence on those who are in the hospital or otherwise suffering from illness and disease.

We pray your strength upon their families and care givers. And we pray your peace on us and all your children, that we might know that whatever we are facing, you are there out ahead of us, preparing a pathway forward toward safety, abundance, and new life, both now and in the here after.

For it is in Christ that we pray, the one who lived and died and rose again, the one who taught us to pray in Your Holy Name, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**