

No Other Gods

Exodus 20:3

Either God wants to do you good, or he does not. It cannot be both, it cannot be neither. In the heart of the Creator, hidden within the eternal Deity, there is either an impulse toward your highest good, or there are designs for your pain and misery.

Which is it?

If you were to take this question in hand and travel to a South African savannah, and see a lion overtake and subdue a buffalo by cruel, brute strength, you might think God intended the harm of his creatures. See how they eat each other!

Or if you carried your question deep into the green of an Indian rainforest, and saw there a lone Bengal tiger lounging among the leaves, you might like the poet say,

Tiger, tiger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?¹

If the natural world were your only cue, you might think that God's immortal hand intended his creatures' harm, rather than their good. After all, think of the thousand dangers that every creature, yourself included, is every day exposed to.

But the natural world is not your only cue.

We have also this: God revealed in words. Blessed words! They really do make all the difference. They clarify the character and will of God for us.

No doubt you have at some time misinterpreted the silence of one of your friends? He or she is away, has not written or called, and you begin to imagine, "He is angry with me, that's why he hasn't called," or, "She thinks I am an inconvenience, that's why she doesn't reply to my texts." But then he calls, then she texts—the person uses words, and suddenly you realize you were entirely wrong. He wasn't angry, he was simply

¹ William Blake, "The Tiger."

asleep; she wasn't bothered by you, she had simply lost her phone. The events which you interpreted as dislike were not dislike at all.

So it is with God. The events of this world, its circumstances, taken alone, might suggest to our imaginations that God intends our harm. But then God speaks, and all is cleared. God wants your good. He means to make you happy. His heart is generous. His love is rich and flows easily to those he has made.

How sweet the words that make this clear to us! They are, as David once sang, "sweeter...than honey and drippings of the honeycomb."² And being so sweet, I hope you will not mind to indulge in one collection of them with me for the next several minutes.

We will consider the first of the Ten Commandments, and my earnest request of heaven is that you will find honey in the law of God this morning, however bitter your circumstances may be. For in these few words we find exposed the heart of God toward us. Do you wonder what God is thinking? This morning you will know.

EXODUS 20:1-3

Maybe you are surprised that I assume we will find honey in this one command: "You shall have no other gods before me." After all, the words are spoken by Jehovah from a mountain all aflame and fierce, to a trembling band of sojourners snatched from their long captivity in Egypt. The scene is a terrifying and almost pitiful one. Where is the honeycomb here?

Further, it is spoken as the first of the Ten Commandments. As Ernie last week noted, these commands in our culture are most often met with ignorance, apathy, or rebellion. They are being sandblasted from the public memory. They are regarded as an outdated law code, primitive and unfit for our educated minds. And will we find honey in this rock?

We will.

Put aside for a time any assumptions you may have about phrases that begin with "Thou shalt not..." Discard your defense mechanisms against boundaries and law. Dig beneath the surface of the command, and you will without fail find a flow of honey.

² Ps. 19:10

The command

Not shall

Look at the command again, in verse 3: “You shall have no...” There is something in the original Hebrew that does not carry over into English. In the Hebrew, eight of the Ten Commandments, including this one, begin with “not.”

1. (v. 3) Not shall there be to you other gods before me.
2. (v. 4) Not shall you make for yourself a carved image.
3. (v. 7) Not shall you take the name of the LORD your God in vain.
4. (v. 13) Not shall you murder.
5. (v. 14) Not shall you commit adultery.
6. (v. 15) Not shall you steal.
7. (v. 16) Not shall you bear false witness.
8. (v. 17) Not shall you covet.

These are all negative commands—they are prohibitions. They forbid a particular action, they are lines drawn in the sand by God, of which he says, “Thus far shall you come and no farther.”

There is almost nothing more offensive in our cultural climate than “Not shall...,” and yet that is exactly what eight of the commandments, including the one in which we are now digging, say.

A little more than a year ago, two men connected with Stanford University wrote a book subtitled, “Rewriting the Ten Commandments for the Twenty-First Century.” In an appendix they include what they call “The Ten Non-Commandments.” They are non-commandments in that, true to the narrow preferences of our age, they do not command. They are simply statements. And of these statements, only two are negative: non-commandment five, “There is no God”; and non-commandment seven, “There is no universal moral truth.”

How different God Almighty speaks from the blazing mountain. He does not waffle, he does not speak softly—his words are more solid than the rocks of the mountain, which shatter before his presence. “Not shall there be to you...” Firmly negative.

Why?

Still no honey is seen. That is because it is hidden within the stone tablets of the command. We must now dig and chisel our way into it. How? The way we dig into any portion of Scripture: with a question.

The command is negative—but let us ask a simple question: why? Why does God forbid the having of other gods?

And let us attempt an answer.

Turn temporarily in your Bible to the first book of the New Testament, to Matthew, and to its 22nd chapter. Jesus is asked which of the laws given to Moses on Sinai is the greatest law. And we find his reply beginning in verse 37:

And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. *On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.*”³

Mark carefully the claim of Jesus: the entire Law depends upon two rules—love God completely, and love others. That is, the 613 commandments given Israel on Sinai are merely expressions of these two rules; beneath the extensive legislation we find a simple undercurrent of love for God and love for neighbor.

Here is the tool with which we can dig into the command. We see on the stony surface this immovable decree, this firm prohibition, “Not shall you have other gods before me.” We ask, “Why does God command this?” And we find the answer in the undercurrent:

God forbids you to have other gods before him because he wants to secure your love, a love that encompasses all your heart, soul, and mind. In the generosity of his broad heart, he wants you to be exclusively his. He forbids other gods, because he wants to be your God. He sets boundaries on the wanderings of your heart because he wants to love you and be loved by you in a wonderful way.

The woman who says “I do” to one man, says “I don’t” to every other man—but does she weep beneath her veil because of the restriction of her love? No! Her marital love is precious and strong and potent *because* it is limited to only one.

So God, knowing that you and I cannot serve two masters, wishes to be our only master. He would have all our love for himself, so he sets the stones around the fire pit to keep our passions contained and burning for him.

³ vv. 37-40, emphasis mine

From the fiery mountain we hear, “Not shall you have...” But faith feels the heat of that fire and knows it to be no other than the jealous love of God in clear expression. The command is only as strong as God’s love for his creatures. Soon hereafter, in Exodus 34:14, God will tell Israel: “you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.” He wants us for himself, and for himself alone.

To you

In Hebrew, the command, although addressed to the nation of Israel, is singular, addressed to one person. Perhaps by this God means to press the command to you individually.

God’s word leaps across three millennia, past the inauguration of a new covenant in the blood of Jesus, and speaks specifically to you. God has seen that you are burdened by a sense of your own failure and guilt. Thoughts of what you have done cling to your mind and are irrepressible. Maybe you have attempted to quell the sense of guilt with behaviors that have only increased it.

When in your secret thoughts you murmur, “I cannot be forgiven, I am too dirty, God does not want me,” the same God who spoke from Sinai hears your anxious thoughts. And through this command he says, “I want you, for myself and myself alone!” You look around you perhaps, and see circumstances that suggest to your mind, “No, no, God is not good, he is not gracious; he is harsh, he is set against me and can never be appeased.” But oh, blessed words! Cover your ears to the circumstances, open them to the words: “You shall have no other gods before me.” That is, “You, and you specifically, are to enter into a relationship of fierce love with me, and me alone. You will be mine, and I will be yours.”

“But I have not listened when God called; I have resisted him too long, he will not have me now.” Know this: when Israel would not listen, God sent her prophet after prophet to woo her and win her, for hundreds of years. He wanted her. The prophets said, “Turn now, every one of you, from his evil way and evil deeds...Do not go after other gods to serve and worship them, or provoke me to anger with the work of your hands. Then I will do you no harm.”⁴

Sinner, God wants you. That is the honey in the rock, the drippings of the honeycomb which run through the engraved words of this first commandment. The blood of Jesus has already been spilt for your

⁴ Jer. 25:5-6

cleansing, the body of Jesus already broken for your healing. Come to Jesus, and you will have God, and he will have you.

The competitors

First then is the command, “Not shall there be to you.” But then, as if to make very clear his jealous intention, to drive into our hearts the impossibility of sharing our affections with many gods, Jehovah puts the two competitors for our hearts side by side. He leaves no doubt—he does not want us with a passing kind of want. He is jealous for us. He will not let us divide ourselves among various lovers. We must be wholly his, or not his at all.

Other gods

Look again at verse 3: “You shall have no *other gods* before *me*.”

On one side of the battle for our hearts are these: “other gods;” on the other is “me,” Jehovah. First then, what are these “other gods,” and how do we know that our hearts are not following after them and so provoking God’s jealousy?

Then

When the first commandment was first given, these “other gods” meant, literally, other gods. Israel had just been snatched from Egypt, where false gods were venerated everywhere; she was on her way to Canaan, where false gods were venerated everywhere. And here, at a lonely mountain in the desert between these two bastions of false deities, she is made into the only monotheist of her time. She is not told that she may have other gods, so long as Jehovah gets first place—no, that is not the meaning of “no other gods *before me*.” She is told to renounce every other so-called god, and set her affections entirely on the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

I say “so-called” god because in fact there are no other deities but this one, the true God, the God of Sinai, the Father of Jesus Christ. What are we to make of the million gods that have been worshipped, and the many which are still worshipped today? We cannot with our age accept a relativism that says, “All gods are God; all roads, all forms of worship, all deities, lead up to the one God.” The one God objects: “Not shall there be to you *other gods*.”

The Apostle Paul goes so far as to say, in 1 Corinthians 10, “what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God.”⁵ Spiritual beings which had fallen from God took the imagined gods of men and became those gods’ puppeteers. In this way they deceived the nations into horrible evils, they used the gods to promote immorality through temple prostitutes, to condone murder through Moloch, a false god who required that his followers burn their young children as a sacrifice to him. The demons used false gods to lure the hearts of men away from the living God.

Now

Our gods today are not very different. They have different names, but still demons use them to lure our affections away from God.

What is a god today? How do you know if you are provoking the jealousy of Jehovah by having another god? Here are a few definitions.

The African church father, Origen, wrote, “What each one honors before all else, what before all things he admires and loves, this for him is God.”

Martin Luther: “Whatever thy heart clings to and relies upon, that is properly thy God.”

The Puritan commentator Matthew Henry: “whatever is esteemed or loved, feared or served, delighted in or depended on, more than God, that (whatever it is) we do in effect make a god of.”

Perhaps a simple way to summarize these thoughts is with this definition: “Whatever we give our highest obedience, that is our god.” We may enjoy many good things while yet holding the one true God chief in our affections. But when the will of God runs contrary to the will of other gods, then we find out whom we serve.

For example, the God of heaven has designed all sexual activity to take place within the covenant of marriage. He has set a wall around it, has hammered in the stakes that delineate the permissible boundaries of it. But then a demon, taking advantage of the weakness of our flesh, presents to us an alternative god, the god of immorality. This false god gives the commandment, “You shall do what feels best, whenever you please. As long as you love, you are free and can do no wrong.”

⁵ v. 20

Both gods make their demands on you, and their demands are opposite each other—so then, how do you know which god is yours? Your god is the one you choose to obey.

You will obey the god that you trust the most, that you believe will give you the most happiness, that you consider most worthy of respect and reverence. The gods of this age, the god of immorality, the god of wealth, the god of physical beauty, the god of selfish ambition, are all at war on one side of the ring, vying for your devotion, for your obedience. These broken wells, these no-gods, even today demons will puppet them before your eyes, tempting you away from the faithful love of God.

Me

And he, God, is on the other side of the ring, the other competitor for your heart. See how verse 3 ends, “You shall have no other gods *before me*.” That is, either before the face of God as he watches, or in opposition to God, as though to provoke him. When we choose false gods, we do so before the face of God, and in open rebellion against his will.

But one scan of our eyes from one corner to the other, from the false gods and their hateful abominations on one side, to the warm heart of God’s love on the other, ought to seal our decision entirely. Do you want flat soda, or fizzy? Do you want lukewarm water or chilled? Would you prefer wearing fertilizer or perfume? In the same line of logic I ask you, do you want false gods, or the true?

Jehovah sets himself against the other gods—he says, “You shall not have *them*; you shall have *me*, and *only me*.” Because he wants you, and all of you.

The apologist G. K. Chesterton once wrote of marriage:

“Keeping to one woman is a small price for so much as seeing one woman. To complain that I could only be married once was like complaining that I had only been born once. It was incommensurate with the terrible excitement of which one was talking.”

It is no different with God’s appeal to you today. Are you slow to relinquish all of your other gods, that you may have this one God? Is it hard to renounce immorality, hard to part ways with selfishness and other old habits of the flesh? Does the prohibition, “Not shall there be

to you other gods” rub roughly against your soul? You are forgetting the honey at the end: “*before me.*”

Conclusion

Friends, God only denies you the world because he wants to give you the universe. Has the devil used the bitter circumstances of your life to spoil the perfume of your notion of God? Has the serpent tricked you with a false portrait of God as harsh and hard and unmoved by our needs and wants and desires? You hear, “Don’t...” But please, don’t stop there. Continue to “Do...” Don’t have other gods—but do have a rich, and pure, and everlasting relationship of love with the Creator of heaven and earth.

When Jesus spared the woman caught in adultery, and laid upon her guilty ears these soft and kind-hearted words: “Neither do I condemn you”; do you think she despised those words which followed, “go, and from now on sin no more”?⁶ “Sin no more, so that you may, as one pardoned and free of the burdens of sin, love me, and I you, forever.” Say no to your other suitors, that you may have your one lover. Say no to your other gods, that you may have your one God.

Do you object that you cannot be God’s, and he yours, because you have not kept this commandment. You have had other gods—even now you are wrestling within because of the lure of false gods. Here is the honey in the rock: God wants to do you good. He has given his Son, Jesus, to succeed where you have failed, to die where you ought to have died for your failure, so that you might be God’s, and God be yours.

Let not one thought of hesitation arise in your mind, not one objection—all is removed by the blood of Jesus, and by the fiery heart of a jealous and loving God. Forget all imposter deities—come, and have God.

⁶ Jn. 8:11