

SERIES: Ten Stupid Things People Do to Mess Up Their Lives

SERMON: **Worshiping the Wrong Gods**

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 20:1-3

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I suppose I should start off today with an apology to Dr. Laura Schlessinger for trading on the name of her two best sellers, *Ten Stupid Things Women Do to Mess Up their Lives*, and *Ten Stupid Things Men Do to Mess Up their Lives*. A Free Church pastor friend of mine first borrowed the title for a series he was preaching on the Ten Commandments, and he said he didn't mind if I borrowed it from him. I'm hoping this isn't a violation on both our parts of the Eighth Commandment, "You shall not steal." I guess I should also apologize to those parents who don't allow your children to use the S-word (stupid, that is). I hope you don't hear, "But Pastor Andrus uses it."

Following our introductory sermon last Lord's Day (and by the way, I want to encourage you to go online and either read or listen to that sermon), I want us to examine the first dumb thing people do to mess up their lives, namely Worship the Wrong Gods. Let's read our Scripture text from Exodus 20:3: "You shall have no other gods before me." That's it. The First Commandment can be summed up in three words: No other gods!

Why, in a document like the Ten Commandments, that is essentially ethical in nature (i.e. it presents to us ultimate standards of right and wrong), would the author begin with a statement of monotheism? What is the big deal about how people worship? Can't people have good values no matter what God they worship, or even without God or, for that matter, without religion? After all, "values clarification" has been a big issue in our public schools at the very same time God has largely been eliminated from the marketplace of public ideas.

Well, just ask yourself how successful the values clarification effort has been? Have you seen any improvement in the ethical and moral level of our schools? Do you think we are any closer to a public consensus concerning right and wrong? I contend instead that we are more lost in a sea of relativism than ever before. The lesson that should scream out to us is that ethics *must* be based upon theology. That is, no concept of right and wrong can be effective and long-lasting unless it is grounded in a right concept of God.

Why is this? Very simply because people inevitably become like the gods they worship. If a man worships a licentious god, like the Baals of the Philistines, he will become a licentious man. If he worships a hard, stern god, like Allah, he is likely to become fatalistic and vengeful. If he worships a sentimentalized god, like the god of the New Age movement, his faith will be all warm and fuzzy but unable to stand up to the rigors of reality. If he worships the god of humanism and individualism, he will become a slave to his own appetites and impulses. A man's god dictates his conduct, consciously or subconsciously.

We said last Sunday that while eight of the Ten Commandments are negative in form, each of

them can be expressed both positively and negatively, i.e. each affirms something and forbids something.

What does the First Commandment affirm?

1. It affirms that there is a God. In fact, the preface to the First Commandment is verse 2, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery,” tells us not only who this God is but what He has done. He is the Lord God, *Yahweh Eloheka*, the self-existent God. No one created Him, and He is therefore responsible to no one. He is self-sufficient, and therefore He does not depend on anyone for anything. Any god less than this is not God, and all so-called gods are less than this.¹ But then we are told that this claim of God’s existence is rooted in historical fact. There is no earthly explanation for what happened in the Exodus, that greatest of all deliverances in the history of Israel. The miracles that occurred then were stupendous, and God makes a claim on their faith because of what He did in space and time.

2. It affirms that there is only one God. The First Commandment also contains a clear and concise affirmation of monotheism—belief in one God and one alone. Of course, there have been many views besides monotheism that have been held by tribes, people, and nations all over the world, probably throughout history, but each is disallowed by the First Commandment. Let me mention six of these. The first is atheism, the notion that there is no God.

Atheism. Some today would have us think atheism is a product of the Enlightenment or the scientific age in which we live. Ancient man may have needed to believe in God in order to explain the phenomena of nature, but we know better today. We have Darwinism and natural selection to explain human existence. We have the Hubble telescope to explain the universe’s beginning. We have conquered the genetic code to explain disease. Who needs God?

But the fact is atheism has been around long before the scientific age, actually for millennia. The only thing different today is the militancy of atheism. Brilliant scientists and scholars like Carl Sagan, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens have been extremely vocal not only about their own certainty that God does not exist but also about the ignorance and superstition demonstrated by anyone who does believe in God.

But you don’t have to be an intellectual to be an atheist. All you have to be is a fool. The Psalmist wrote 3,000 years ago, “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no god.’” By referring to the atheist as a fool I am not casting aspersions on his intellect. “Fool” is a moral term, not an intellectual evaluation. Some of these individuals are extremely bright in their fields, but one can be extremely bright and a fool at the same time. A detective who ignored the fingerprints at a crime scene would be a foolish detective. The atheist is a fool because he ignores the fingerprints of God on this universe.

Agnosticism. The second view denied by the first commandments is agnosticism, which holds there is not enough information to know whether there is a God or not. On the surface,

agnosticism is a more rational position than atheism. After all, the agnostic is not claiming to know absolutely that there is no God. He's withholding judgment until more evidence is in. But the fact is there is plenty of evidence; it's just that the spiritually blind cannot see. It's not even that they don't want to see; they *cannot*. 2 Corinthians 4:4 says, "The god of this age (Satan) has blinded the minds of unbelievers so they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ." (See also John 9:39). Most agnostics, by the way, are practical atheists, because while acknowledging they are unsure whether there is a god, they generally live like there is none.

Deism. A third view is Deism, the view that God created the world but never interferes with it. He set in place immutable natural laws, and nature provides all we need to live by. But Deism is renounced in the very prologue to the Ten Commandments. He is the God who "brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." The God of the Bible is one who interfaces with his creation, who rules it through His providence, and every once in a while even interrupts the laws by which He established it to run.

Henotheism. Fourth, we have henotheism, the belief in a national god or a tribal deity. Henotheists worship only their own god but acknowledge that the gods of other nations or tribes are quite as real as their own. When an ancient tribe conquered one of its neighbors, it not only seized their possessions and their women, but also their gods, believing such an action would give them continuing dominance over their enemies.

Interestingly, there is a resurgence of henotheism among many mainline church liberals today. They profess to believe in the Christian God and pay lip service to Him, but they tend to view the Christian God as more-or-less the tribal deity of white, Anglo-Saxon capitalists, and in a desperate effort to be tolerant and broad-minded, they grant equal validity to Allah, Buddha, Confucius, Sophia, what-have-you.

Polytheism. Polytheism refers to a belief in many gods at the same time. Most ancient cultures of the world, including the Greeks and Romans, were polytheistic, and many still are today, perhaps the best known being Hinduism, which worships millions of gods. Mormonism is also polytheistic, in that it teaches that humans are able to become gods, just as God was once a human.

In Old Testament days the prophets were particularly concerned about a certain kind of polytheism. When Moses delivered the Ten Commandments, the Israelites had just escaped from the polytheism of Egypt but were heading for an even worse kind in Canaan called "Baal worship." The most dangerous aspect of Baal worship is that it was a fertility cult, which turned sexual immorality into an act of worship, and gluttony and drunkenness into a way of praising the gods. If there was going to be any chance for God's people to survive morally and spiritually in that kind of world, they had to begin with a solid and accurate view of the one true God. That's why the Ten Commandments start out as they do. One can hardly underestimate the profound impact of monotheism on those rescued from pagan cultures. Listen to Joy Davidman, the wife of C. S. Lewis:

. . . the belief in one God slew a host of horrors: malign storm demons, evil jinn of

sickness, blighters of the harvest, unholy tyrants over life and death; belief in God destroyed the fetishes, the totems, the beast-headed bullies of old time. It laid the ax to sacred trees watered by the blood of virgins, it smashed the child-eating furnaces of Moloch, and toppled the gem-encrusted statues of the peevish divinities half-heartedly served by Greece and Rome.

The old gods fought among themselves, loved and hated without reason, demanded unspeakable bribes and meaningless flatteries. While they were worshiped, a moral law was impossible, for what pleased one deity would offend another. If your wife ran away from you, it was not because you beat her, but because you'd forgotten the monthly sacrifice to Ishtar; just offer a double sacrifice, and you'd get two new wives prettier than the old.

Then came the knowledge of God. An almost unimaginable person—a single being, creator of heaven and earth, not to be bribed with golden images or children burned alive; loving only righteousness. A being who demanded your whole heart.ⁱⁱ

I am not suggesting, of course, that monotheism was introduced by the First Commandment. Adam and Eve and their early descendants knew there was only one God, but as the human race multiplied and spread, these other views developed and were propagated. By the time of Moses, God deemed it necessary to re-affirm and actually set in stone, literally, what had once been obvious—namely that there is only one God and Yahweh is His name. All other so-called gods are imposters.

This is, of course, a very exclusive view. It doesn't fit well with our postmodern concepts today. We like to be tolerant, which no longer means *respecting* individuals even though we reject their ideas; today it means *accepting* their ideas, no matter how absurd they are, as equal in value to our own, and accepting their gods as equal to our own. Which brings me to add a sixth "ism" to the list in our outline, which I also believe to be forbidden by the First Commandment:

Syncretism. Syncretism is defined as the attempt to reconcile contrary beliefs, often while melding practices of various faiths. It is an inclusive approach to religion that tries to find the best in every tradition. The best known example of syncretism today is probably the ecumenical movement, which began with an effort to focus on what different faiths have in common rather than how they differ. There's a certain rationale to that and anyone can see value in it to a certain extent. Most pro-life evangelicals have no problem joining with Catholics to fight abortion or with Mormons to oppose same-sex marriage. That is a good kind of ecumenism.

I have even at times called myself an evangelical ecumenist, by which I mean that I want to focus on the areas of agreement between true evangelicals, rather than on how we differ. I can have true fellowship with a Presbyterian believer despite the fact that he baptizes infants and I dedicate them. I can have fellowship with a Lutheran believer despite the fact that he has a different view of the Lord's Supper. I can have fellowship with a charismatic believer despite the fact that my worship is more cerebral and his more emotional. And anyone who attended the Mayor's Prayer Breakfast a few weeks ago knows it is possible to have fellowship with a born-again Catholic, as the speaker delivered a fine testimony of faith in Jesus. I want to enjoy

fellowship with *all those* who have been born again by faith in Christ no matter what their label and no matter what our differences in areas non-essential to the Gospel.

But I have no interest whatever in the kind of ecumenism that has been pushed for the past 50 years by the National Council of Churches, which essentially tries to find the lowest common denominator in all faiths, which unashamedly claims there are many ways to God, and which adamantly refuses to call any faith false, except, of course, for faith that has the audacity to claim Jesus as the only Way. To that kind of ecumenism (really syncretism) God says in unmistakably clear language, “You shall have no other gods before me.”

Thirdly, the statement, “You shall have no other gods before me, or besides me,” is also a statement about worship.

3. It affirms that God is to be worshiped. The statement that “You shall have no other gods before me,” inherently also expresses, “You must have *Me*.” To worship is to ascribe value to an object. The original English word was “worth-ship” or worthiness. That which has worth or value in your sight is what you worship. To worship is to value anything above other things so that you serve it through the amount of energy and time you expend on it.

It is possible, and in fact quite common, to worship things other than God. It is even possible to profess an orthodox faith and be part of a biblical church yet not worship God at all. Worship has little to do with what we say we love and value, and everything to do with what we actually love and value. Worship has relatively little to do with music, folded hands, or closed eyes, and everything to do with where our hearts are. Martin Luther put it this way: “God is that in which I place my final trust.” We could also say, “That for which I would give anything and accept nothing in exchange is the most important thing in my life. Whatever that is, is my god.”

So far we have seen what the First Commandment affirms—that there is a God, that there is only one God, and that that God deserves to be worshiped. But as we have seen, each of the Commandments both affirms and forbids.

What does the First Commandment forbid?

And the answer is obvious.

1. It forbids idolatry. Idolatry is worshiping anyone or anything other than the one true God. We are most familiar with the kind of idolatry that involves graven images—savages groveling before a totem pole, cruel-faced statues in Hindu temples, or priests of Baal dancing around Elijah’s altar. This is idolatry alright, but it is not all that is idolatry. I think it is important to make a distinction here that we will carry forward next week.

Some people use graven images to represent false gods.

Some people use graven images to represent the true God.

Both are forbidden. The first is forbidden principally by the First Commandment, and the second is forbidden principally by the Second Commandment. Josh will be explaining the second next week, but I will focus today on the graven images that represent false gods.

2. Why is idolatry of this kind forbidden? I suggest three reasons:

It is ignorant. It's dumb, stupid, and idiotic. There isn't a single intelligent thing about idol worship. Isaiah 44 speaks of how an idol worshiper cuts down a tree, uses part of it to make a fire to bake his bread and part of it to make a god. What kind of sense does that make? Isaiah 40 talks about how the idol has to be made out of hardwood, because no one would want his god to rot. And it has to be made wider at the bottom than at the top so it won't totter in the wind. It would be a shame for your god to fall over on you and injure you.

One of the most telling descriptions of the idol worshiper in all of literature comes from the apocryphal book called *The Letter of Jeremiah*. This letter is not inspired Scripture, but it is as quotable as Shakespeare or C. S. Lewis. In one telling tirade against idols, the letter says that when a wooden idol *does* eventually rot, the priests just claim its heart has melted. The idol can do nothing to keep bats, swallows, birds and cats from lighting on its head. And when a fire breaks out in a temple, the priests manage to flee, but the gods are burned like a wooden beam.

It is more than ignorant to worship an idol; it is contemptible. Something can be ignorant without being contemptible, but idol worship is both ignorant and contemptible. The prophets had nothing but biting sarcasm for idol worshipers. There is probably no passage that demonstrates that better than 1 Kings 18. In the fascinating story about Elijah and the prophets of Baal, the prophet displays utter contempt for the idol-gods of Ahab and Jezebel. He mocks them by urging them to “call out with a loud voice, for Baal is a god.”

But, of course, gods are busy—they aren't just sitting on clouds strumming guitars. So Elijah suggests that Baal may be on a journey, or maybe he's just returned from a trip and is taking a nap, or perhaps he has stepped off the trail to relieve himself. That's a euphemistic way of expressing what the Hebrew says—the actual language would offend our sensitivities. But it didn't bother Elijah to use it because he wanted to offend their sensitivities. He wanted to awaken them to the utter ridiculousness of their worship of idols.

But idol worship is more than ignorant and more than contemptible; it is dangerous. The Apostle Paul has a lot to say about idolatry, but we have to examine it carefully or we can misunderstand. In 1 Corinthians 8:4 he says, “We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.” However, in 1 Corinthians 10 the same Apostle sounds an alarm when we says, “My dear friends, flee from idolatry” (10:14). If an idol is nothing, then why should we flee from it? He goes on to explain in 10:18-20:

“Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants

with demons.”

In other words, while an idol is not alive and is certainly not a “god,” still there are spiritual realities called demons who *use* idols for their own benefit. Therefore idol worshipers are not merely worshiping wood and stone carvings, and they certainly aren’t worshipping God. They are actually uniting themselves with demons. That’s flat scary!

So it is clear from this passage that all religion is not intrinsically good and it is also clear why God continually and unceasingly warns believers to flee from false religion.

The last question I want to ask regarding the First Commandment is this:

How does the First Commandment apply today?

Are you aware of the degree to which idolatry is still practiced today? Hinduism, the dominant religion in India today, has approximately 350,000,000 gods, about one for every three people, and almost all are represented by idols. Cows and rats are worshiped, to the point that rats every year, according to *National Geographic*, eat enough grain to fill a train of grain cars stretching from San Diego to New York. But no one will exterminate them because they are sacred. There is a beautiful bird hospital in New Delhi, where winged creatures, also worshiped, receive expensive medical care while human beings starve to death on the streets outside the hospital. That, friends, is the modern legacy of pagan idolatry—very little different from its ancient legacy.

But you say, we evangelicals aren’t in any danger of idolatry. No one is going to erect a bronze statue of Billy Graham in our sanctuary! No, probably not, but there is nevertheless a very real danger of the infiltration of idolatry in the church today. After all, all idols are not all the same shape, are they? Listen as I read again from Joy Davidman:

I worship a Porsch sports car, brother. All my days I give it offerings of oil and polish. Hours of my time are devoted to its ritual; . . . and it establishes me among my friends as a success in life. What model is your idol, brother?

I worship my house beautiful, sister. Long and loving meditation have I spent on it; the chairs contrast with the rug, the curtains harmonize with the woodwork, all of it is perfect and holy. . . . I live only for the service of my house, and it rewards me with the envy of my sisters, who must rise up and call me blessed. Lest my children profane the holiness of my house with dirt and noise, I drive them out of doors. What shape is your idol, sister?

I worship the pictures I paint, . . . I worship my job; . . . I worship my golf game, my bridge game . . . I worship my comfort; after all, isn't enjoyment the goal of life? . . . I worship my church; I want to tell you, the work we've done in missions beats all other denominations in this city, and next year we can afford that new organ, and you won't find a better choir anywhere . . . I worship myself . . ."

"What shape is your idol?"

The First Commandment calls us to undivided loyalty to the one true God. While we don’t have

totem poles in our churches, and we don't wear amulets that we worship, it is common for our loyalty to be divided between God and other priorities: success, science, health, the environment, democracy, conservatism, capitalism, secularism, humanism, naturalism, and the cult of progress. Celebrity idolatry is incredibly widespread in our society, and even in the church. I think Michael Moriarty is right on target when he writes,

*The idolizing process is at work . . . in churches around the globe. God is presented as the enterprise deity who lends almighty support to political crusades, the celestial therapist whose main objective is to make people feel better about themselves, the tame God who won't . . . ruffle our comfortable feathers or the divine chameleon who conforms to individual spiritual experiences. These gods are always supportive, compassionate, congenial, and very stimulating.*ⁱⁱⁱ

And John Timmerman adds these very thoughtful comments:

We—church organizations, too—want a god that requires no commitment of us, one we can quickly understand and manipulate. We will go through the Sunday rituals because we hope thereby to appease God, to keep on his good side, just in case we ever should need his help. But please don't ask us to break out of those rituals in order to struggle into a serious personal relationship of love and obedience. This is idolatry.^{iv}

The long and short of it is that everybody worships something or someone. We worship what we supremely value or admire most. People chart the course of their lives based on what they believe really matters. God wants that place in our hearts and lives, and He wants it all to Himself.

Conclusion: The Second Commandment, as we will see next time, advances from “No other gods!” to “No graven images!” That is, we are not even to make or use visible manifestations of the one true God as an aid to our worship of Him. There is a strong tendency to do this in Christendom, because the God we worship, unlike the gods of the pagans, is invisible. We want to make Him more tangible and visible and graspable. However, this almost always leads to a denigration of God's character.

Of course, God Himself provided for our need to see what He is like and to know Him intimately. Listen to Colossians 1:15-20:

He (Jesus Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

It is not idolatry to worship the image God Himself has provided; i.e. His One and Only Son. All other images are idolatrous.

One of the great sculptures of Christ is that by Thorwaldsen.⁴ After he had carved it he was offered a commission to carve a statue of Venus for the Louvre in Paris. His answer was, “The hand that carved the form of Christ can never carve the form of a heathen goddess.” Would that all Christians had the same kind of single-minded commitment when they come to Christian worship.

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- i. James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 228.
 - ii. Joy Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain*, Westminster Press, 1953, p. 21,22.
 - iii. Michael Moriarty, *The Perfect Ten: The Blessings of Following God's Commandments in a Postmodern World*, Zondervan, 1999, p. 32.
 - iv. John Timmerman, *Do We Still Need the Ten Commandments?*, Augsburg, 1997