

Series: Ten	Reference: Exodus 20:4-6; 1 John 5:21; Acts 17:16-34	Title: The Second	Date: 06.26.2022
Website Writeup:			
This week we look at the 2nd Commandment from Exodus 20 where God calls us to worship Him alone uncompromisingly, and not to involve ourselves with false idols which only bring destruction.			

COLOR CHANGES IN TEXT INDICATE SLIDE CHANGES

A number of weeks ago we looked at Paul in Acts 17:16-34 in the meeting of the Areopagus. If you recall, while in Athens he'd been invited to speak to a group of philosophers on Mars Hill, as to the Gospel he'd been proclaiming around Athens. At that time Paul said, "...I walked around & looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship - and this is what I am going to proclaim to you." Then proceeded to share Christ as that unknown God.

There's a story behind this story, which Don Richardson tells in chapter one of his book *Eternity in Their Hearts*. Through much research, he found the origin of the altar to this unknown god based mainly upon a recorded history by Diogenes Laertius, a Greek author of the 3rd century A.D., in a classical work called *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. As well as Aristotle's *The Art of Rhetoric*, (book 3, 17: 10, found in the Loeb Classical Library, translated by J. H. Freese and published in Cambridge, Massachusetts). *Plato's Laws* and a few other sources.

"In short, the story begins sometime in the 6th century before Christ, with the city of Athens being decimated by a plague. With no explanation, or cure in sight, it was assumed one of the city's many gods had been offended. City leaders sought to determine which god it was & find a way of appeasing that god, but the city of Athens had hundreds of gods - their statues littered Mars Hill. When all efforts failed to discern which, Epimenides was brought in as an outside consultant from Cyprus whom Paul quoted in Acts 17.

Epimenides concluded none of the known gods of Athens had been offended, rather it was some unknown god. He proposed a possible remedy. He had a flock of choice sheep kept from food until they were hungry. Then had these sheep turned loose on Mars Hill in good pasture. For any sheep not to have eaten its fill would've been unexplainable. They watched carefully, to see if any would lie down & not eat, even though hungry. To their surprise several did. Altars were erected at each spot where a sheep lay down dedicated to an 'unknown god'. On those altars, the sheep which lay in that spot was sacrificed. Almost immediately the plague began to subside.

But...over a period of time, those altars were forgotten, began to deteriorate & attention was given back to all the hundreds of other gods who'd not done a thing for Athens but take up space. One altar, was restored & preserved later by two old council members

who'd been a part of that process when young. Centuries later, Paul referred to this altar as the starting point for his sermon on Mars Hill quoting this very poet, Epimenides.”¹

Richardson writes, “If Athens boasted several hundred gods in Epimenides’s time, by Paul’s day there may have been hundreds more. Idolatry, by its very nature, has a built-in inflation factor. Once men reject the one omniscient, omnipotent & omnipresent God in favor of lesser deities, they eventually discover - to their frustration - that it takes an infinite number of lesser deities to try to fill the true God’s shoes!

When Paul saw Athens prostituting man’s sacred privilege of worship upon wood & stone statues, he was appalled & took immediate action. First: “*He reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews & the God-fearing Greeks*” (Acts 17: 17). They weren’t practicing this idolatry, but they were the people most responsible to oppose it, since they’d been entrusted with the very Words of God & a calling to be a light to the nations.

Perhaps they’d become so accustomed to idolatry they could no longer mount a persuasive offensive against it. In any case, Paul launched his own. He reasoned also, Luke says, “*in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there*” (Acts 17: 17). And Luke records their reaction: “*A group of Epicurean & Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, ‘What is this babbling trying to say?’ ‘Others remarked, ‘He seems to be advocating foreign gods’*” (Acts 17: 18). They heard Paul speak of Theos - God. But Theos was a familiar term to them. But they used it not as a personal name, but as a general term for any deity - just as ‘man’ in English means any man & isn’t considered suitable as a personal name for any one man. The philosophers there must have known, however, that Xenophanes, Plato & Aristotle - three great philosophers - used Theos as a personal name for one Supreme God in their writings.”² God was just a word to them, not a personal knowable being. But Paul was saying, there is no other God but God, and He’s found in Jesus.

What do we learn from that story?

1. God was calling the Athenians to Himself as much as 600 years before Paul’s arrival.
2. Athenian devotion was short-lived, their mistake was to place these altar’s in the middle of all the rest; equal footing with all other false gods. They didn’t renounce the rest & confess the One true God, they simply added Him to the library.
3. As a result they didn’t pursue God & forgot Him, the altars went into disrepair. So, instead of finding freedom in the one true God, they spent 6 more centuries in bondage.
4. They found that once men reject the one omniscient, omnipotent & omnipresent God in favor of lesser deities, they eventually discover that these gods fail them miserably.
5. But God is patient, and sustained one altar for the day Paul would show up & tell them once more & clearly.

¹ <https://bible.org/seriespage/27-apostle-athens-preaching-philosophers-acts-1715-34>

² <http://discovercreation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Eternity-in-Their-Hearts-Excerpt-by-Don-Richardson.pdf>

This week we look at the 2nd Commandment from Exodus 20 where God calls us to uncompromisingly worship Him alone, not involving ourselves with false idols. There are over 1000 references to idol worship in the Scriptures, so it's an important subject.

Turn with me to p52 in your pew Bibles & follow along as I read Exodus 20:4-6...*“You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third & fourth generation of those who hate me, 6but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me & keep my commandments.”*

1 John 5:21 urges the same, saying...*Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.* Sound advice as we look at that story of the Athenians, and our situation today, because idols come with consequences.

We need only to think back to the Israelites entering Canaan, the Promised Land. Canaan was a dark religious place steeped in idol worship. They didn't yet know Israel's God. Maybe you were taught in Sunday school about idol worship, people had temples & little statues of wood or stone. Placing these in their home, on a mantle, bowing to them. Seems harmless. Why was God so upset, other than it wasn't Him they were worshiping? After all they didn't know about Him yet. We know little pieces of stone or wood have no real effect or power to harm. From Sunday school we viewed them as bowing to an idol, then going on about life - no power in it.

What we weren't taught was the actual extent & form the worship took. They were worshiping a number of gods. Baal the supreme deity of many gods for one, was the male deity of land or fertility. His title meant landowner. Then Ashtoreth (also known as Venus in Rome, Aphrodite in Greece, Ishtar in Babylonia & other names) the Goddess of fertility & war imaged by Asherah poles, phallic symbols decorating the high places.

They believed if these deities saw them in lascivious sexual acts they'd be aroused bringing forth rain making land fruitful. Within this religious structure was a temple priesthood of good looking young folks. As your act of worship, you'd go to the temple & perform acts such as orgies, incest, homosexual & adulterous acts as a spiritual form of worship. Which created a paternity problem, babies with no way of knowing the father. So, there was a third god, Molech, the god of fire who demanded child sacrifice - the solution to the unwanted byproduct of the worship of the other two deities - the abortion solution for ancient people & one reason for Gods extreme disgust & anger.

Idols come with consequences. Israel was not unlike Athens. The history, in short, is that God marked His people physically & spiritually. And after 40 years they come to the point of going into the Promised Land led by Joshua. There were the Canaanites & God asks them to go in & *live as children of light*; to be His witnesses in a dark world of idol worship. But although they served the Lord under Joshua, later they did evil in the eyes of the Lord & served the Baals & the Ashtoreths themselves. They conquered the Canaanites physically, but were conquered spiritually by Canaanite idol worship. They

prostituted themselves to other gods, wouldn't listen to the judges, waxed & waned, returning to ways even worse than their forefathers. God says, "I'll no longer drive out the nations due to this." Then uses their enemies to purify His people. In Numbers 25 it says the Israelites didn't even wait to enter the land before they started to serve other gods & 24,000 were killed for their disobedience at that time (Paul mentions this in 1 Cor. 10:8-22).

Judges 17:6 says...*'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.'* In Jeremiah 11:13 it says, *"You have as many gods as you have towns, O Judah; and the altars you have set up to burn incense to that shameful god Baal are as many as the streets of Jerusalem."* Sounds like Athens. The point being is that it is all too easy to be immersed in a culture of idol worship, and to have your eyes averted from God to serve idols. Athens shows it. Israel shows it. America shows it.

There's a logical progression for the commands. First, God says have no other gods before me. Then almost as if to clarify, God says to not make any graven images; the term for idol. The second commandment is a command in two parts: don't make idols, don't worship them. The reason being, it always has devastating consequences sometimes in the short run, and definitely in the long run! Idols don't have to be made out of wood or stone, we make them nonetheless.

Tim Keller calls them 'counterfeit gods' - "anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart & imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give. A counterfeit god is anything so central & essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living."³ What can't you live without? Oftentimes, we say we can't live without something like air conditioning or chocolate, but we're joking. But, when it comes to things like a spouse or child, the thought of losing them makes it so we don't want to live anymore. In that case, the person or thing may've become an idol.

An idol's something you create, then worship; a person or object. It can be intangible - like a career, or a relationship. We live in a society obsessed with idols. We even have a show called *American Idol*. It's easy to become far more obsessed with the latest celebrity than with God. God says don't. Rather put Him first. Not because He's some megalomaniac, but because the minute you put God second is the minute you fall into the trap of crafting & worshipping an idol which will always fail you.

Idols don't give life! As John Stott says, "Idols are dead; God is living. Idols are false; God is true. Idols are many; God is one. Idols are visible & tangible; God is visible & intangible...Idols are creatures, the work of human hands; God is the Creator of the universe & of all humankind."⁴ Idols are dead, untrue, the work of our hands. Our own creations. We invent gods & worship, while the true living creator God, is waiting,

³ Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* [New York: Penguin Books, 2009], 5

⁴ John Stott, *The Message of 1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Bible Speaks Today [Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991], 39

watching & wants our devotion. We don't need to chase after, invent & worship counterfeit gods. The one true God who's alive has revealed Himself in Jesus! Focusing on Jesus is the antidote to idolatry.

In Joshua 24:14-15, Joshua challenges Israel to make a choice...“Now fear the Lord & serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River & in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me & my household, we will serve the Lord.” The choice is before us, daily, who will we serve?

Francis Schaeffer writes about how many believers think following God is a choice made once at some point in the past. But in this passage from Joshua, Schaeffer points out that “choose” is not a once-and-for-all choice. Rather, it's a continuous choosing under the safe covering of grace in Christ. Scripture speaks of both being saved in the sense of once & for all, but also being saved in the sense of being renewed over time. In choosing daily to put Christ first, we're being saved from ourselves, and outside destructive forces - diversion into idol worship hamstrings that process bringing confusion & devastation.

It's instinctual to worship what our families do. If you can identify the gods battling for your heart, you can see from where they originate. Did your parents worship work? You'll probably struggle with letting work & achievement sit on the throne. Did your mother worship people's approval? I bet you're overly concerned with others' thoughts about you. Were your parents addicted to substances? You've likely struggled in this area too. Kids follow parents, their words, but more so, lifestyle. Recently, I met a young woman who in college was a great ministry leader, but since she's married an agnostic & drifted away. She had a baby & said, “I'd like to get back to church for the child's sake.” Instead, she should repent & put Jesus first for His sake, then overtime her child will see a mother who's walking with God & follow in that path.

There's a great form of idolatry prevalent today fostered by cultures drifting away from sound biblical teaching, as the apostle Paul warned, *“For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine”* (2 Timothy 4:3).

In these pluralistic, liberal times, many have redefined God. We've forsaken the God revealed to us in Scripture & have recast Him to comply with our own inclinations & desires - a kinder, gentler god who's infinitely more tolerant than the One revealed in Scripture. Less demanding, or judgmental, tolerating many lifestyles without placing guilt on anyone's shoulders. As this idolatry is propagated by churches, congregants believe they're worshipping God. However, these made-over gods are created by man, and to worship them is to worship idols. worshipping a god of one's own making is particularly tempting for many whose habits, lifestyles, drives & desires are not in harmony with Scripture.⁵

⁵ <https://www.gotquestions.org/idol-worship.html>

Understanding contemporary idols show why they're such a powerful temptation. Idols are anything we place ahead of God in life, taking God's place in our hearts; possessions, careers, relationships, hobbies, sports, entertainment, goals, greed, addictions to alcohol/drugs/gambling/pornography, etc. Some idols are clearly sinful, but many can be things which were meant to be good, such as relationships or careers.

Psalm 115:4-8 characterizes idols this way... "*...made by human hands. ⁵They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. ⁶They have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell. ⁷They have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk, nor can they utter a sound with their throats. ⁸Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.*" James 1:14-15 says... "*...each person is tempted when they're dragged away by their own evil desire & enticed. ¹⁵Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.*" We become our idols, they rob us of our senses, bring confusion & deaden our conscience. Better to follow 1 Corinthians 10:31 which says... "*...whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*"

We're not unlike Israel or Athens. Jeremiahs words could be ascribed to America as a new motto, "Everyone does as they see fit." Idols of old were created to serve human desires of comfort, wealth, sustenance, sexual fulfillment, power, fame, etc. Baal & Ashtoreth, gods meant to provide power, wealth, comfort & sexual gratification. Molech, a god meant to give personal choice & bodily autonomy - allowing people to gratify themselves, but without the responsibility of parenthood & the value of life. Sound familiar?

The idols we serve may not be carved in wood or stone, but they serve the same purpose, are very real & come with consequences - we hope they'll fulfill, but America's shown they don't. The longer they reign unchallenged as God's people are silent in witness, the more damage is done to people! Ours is a spiritual malady in America. As we worship at the altar of power, wealth, comfort, pleasure, personal choice & unbridled sexuality, the unborn continue to be murdered, kids continue to be shot in schools, crime rises, the economy tanks, kids continue to be confused about sexuality & make irreversible changes to their bodies, need I go on? **This is our responsibility when we have the remedy to the plague. Are we complicit? Are we silent? Like the Jews & God-fearing Greeks in Athens, have we become numb to the idol worship surrounding us?**

Idolatry, by nature, has a built-in inflation factor. What we learn from Israel in Canaan, and the Athenians of Pauls day, is still true of our culture. God's calling people to Himself. Devotion's often short-lived. We don't renounce our idols. We remake God to fit our desires. As a result we don't pursue the one true God remaining in bondage. Once we reject the one true God in favor of idols, we find they not only fail but destroy society! But God is patient waiting for His people to respond. **What is it that God calls us to do about the plague? Exactly what Paul did. Keep it simple, put Jesus first, preaching His message to those around us if we want to see lasting change! It is Matthew 28:18-20 - the Great Commission!**