**Exodus 20:3-6** July 1, 2018

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*Exodus20:3You shall have no other gods before me. 4You shall not make for yourself an idol 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 fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 6but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**With All My Heart**

That hymn we just sang—the one that ended, “O God, be merciful to me”—that *is not* a toe-tapper! You are not going to walk out of church humming that one. On the other hand, that first one, the one on the back of your bulletins, we could get into that one. Our hearts felt full of joy. We smiled, we could think of how much we love Jesus. But this last one… Didn’t we already take care of that when we had the confession of sins on page 3? Why do we have to sin dirges like that, anyway?

Today we begin studying the command part of the Ten Commandments. Last week, you might remember was God’s own introduction to the Ten Commandments: *“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”* Before God gave his people commands, he wanted them to remember how good he had been to them. He wanted their obedience to be out of love, not fear. Us, too. When obeying the Ten Commandments, God wants us to think of how much he first loved us.

So, this week when I prefaced the sermon on the First Commandment with *“O God, be merciful to me,”* it sounds like I am not following my own advice. Last week: obey out of love. This week: O God, be merciful. Am I contradicting myself? That is the difference between Gospel and Law. Last week was what God does for us: Gospel. This week is what we are to do: Law.

This reflects the truth that our relationship with God’s law, his commandments, is complex. It is complex because while we love his law and admit that it is good, we also break it and so become guilty. Or maybe our experience could be stated this way: the Ten Commandments are good in theory, but not so much in practice. With each commandment we will find this tension. No less than the Apostle Paul felt this tension and expressed it this way: *“When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin”* (Romans 7:21-23). Which is why I said that even Christians have a complicated relationship with God’s law.

Let’s look at our complicated relationship with the First Commandment, the one that says, ***“You shall have no other gods before me.”***

**What It Means to Have a God**

We first must understand what it is ***“to have a god.”***

Does “having a god” mean admitting that God created the universe? Does it mean occasionally referring to The Man Upstairs? That is not *having* a god. As the Apostle James sarcastically told some fence-sitters, *“You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder!”* (James 2:19).

Then what does it mean ***“to have a god.”*** God follows up his command with, ***“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.”*** So we feel pretty good about themselves. “I haven’t bowed down to any little statue lately – or ever! I don’t worship other gods. No bronze Buddha under my roof. I’m good.”

But God’s word does not let us off so easily. Martin Luther rightly and briefly explained this commandment to us on that pink piece of cardstock in your bulletin. Under the first commandment he wrote, “What does this mean? We should fear, love and trust in God above all things.”

“*Having* a god” means asking ourselves these questions: “What do I respect as the guiding principle for my life?” Your answer is your god. “For what do I have an enduring love and concern that transcends all other loves nad concerns in my life?” That is your god. “What do I trust to give me what I need and desire?” Your answer is your god.

Whatever you respect, love or trust above all else is your god.

In our Old Testament reading we heard about three men standing before a king. That king had the power to burn them alive (not a pleasant way to go), or to let them live. Whom did they fear, whom did they respect? God or the king? How many of us would have done a quick kow-tow to that idol to save our own skin! We could rationalize it, “Well, I didn’t mean it. My heart wasn’t in it. Besides, what good is a dead Christian? Isn’t it better to preserve my life and be there for my family?” How easily we fall into idolatry! Any time we give in to wise-sounding public opinion, peer pressure, or coercion or overagainst the will of God, we are idolaters. We respect these things more than we respect God. Sin!

So, too, whenever we love anything at the expense of God, we are idolaters. That rich young man came to Jesus and knelt on the ground before him and asked, *“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* Yet while he scrupulously obeyed all of God’s commands outwardly, inwardly he had an illicit love: his wealth. As long as he had the wealth, the comfortable life that he wanted, he could serve God. But the moment Jesus asked him to release his grasp on wealth and follow him, this man went back to his wealth.

The loves of life are many: our family, our standard of living, the interests we get passionate about (sports or gaming or hobbies), our children’s future, leisure time. Do any of these cause you to neglect God? Do any of these make you miss church, neglect prayer, fail to receive the Lord’s Supper? If it happens regularly, these are your gods. Sin!

Trusting in God. There is recorded in the Old Testament one of the lesser-known kings of Judah, King Asa. There a single verse in his biography speaks volumes about the First Commandment: *“In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa was afflicted with a disease in his feet. Though his disease was severe, even in his illness he did not seek help from the Lord, but only from the physicians”* (2 Chronicles 16:12). Only from the physicians. Oh, how quickly we rush to the doctors, the friends, the therapists of this world without a prayer to our heavenly Father. Whom do we really trust? Who is our god? And how often we prove that our trust in God is feeble and failing as we lie awake at night worried about our job, our children, our reputation, our finances. Do we trust God? How often we do not! Idolatry!

**What Happens When My Heart Is Divided**

And so this commandment that teaches us not to bow down to idols, this commmandment that we so smugly think of applying only to benighted souls in Africa or Asia who actually bow down to images, how it condemns us who routinely respect, love and trust so many things so much more than the God of the Bible.

“O God, be merciful to me!”

Indeed, we ought to pray so! God says, ***“I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.”*** “Jealous” does not mean that the Lord God is a selfish, envious god. The Hebrew word here is used five times in the Bible, and it is used only about God and his desire for his people. It is the jealousy a devoted husband would and *should* feel if his wife were showing too much attention to another man. Would his jealousy not be justified? In the same way the Lord God who created us and redeemed us is jealous for our affections.

Having other gods arouses more than a jealous feeling in God. God says, ***“I am a jealous God, [who punishes].”*** He punishes. He declares that he will throw people who reject him out of his presence forever, so great is this sin.

**Hearts Restored to God**

Yet for all who freely admit that God has a right to us, to our lives, our respect, trust and love, and who freely admit their failures to keep God in first place in their lives, God tells us, ***“[And I] show love to a thousand generations of those who love me.”***

While the Israelites were at Mt. Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, God also provided for the forgiveness of sins. At his direction they would bring a sacrifice and he would count them as forgiven. So it was that animal sacrifices were offered as a recognition that none of us can pay for our own sins. But those were merely symbolic of another who came later bearing sin in our place. *“[Christ] bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”* (1 Peter 2:24)

That Old Testament sacrificial system had something else special in it. Not only were there sacrifices for sin, but there was something else called a fellowship offering.

Think about this: After you have really messed up with somebody, and even after you have apologized and the other person has said “I forgive you,” you know how you still feel a little awkward. It can happen between us and God too. We sin. We ask forgiveness. God tells us we are forgiven. But we can still wonder if he really has forgiven us, completely.

The fellowship offering was a special offering which often followed a sin offering. In the fellowship offering, an animal was offered. But unlike other offerings, after a small portion was burned on the altar, the rest of the meat could be eaten by the forgiven sinner there in God’s temple. He would eat it there in God’s presence, a meal symbolically shared between God (burning there on the altar) and the sinner (on the plate in front of him): fellowship restored.

In a way, it is like the Sacrament which Christ instituted for us. Jesus says to us, “Take and drink, this is my blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.” So that even when we have confessed to God, and heard that we are forgiven, here in this sacrament we have a special assurance of God’s superabundant gift of forgiveness How good it is to be forgiven! How it renews our love for God!

There is a lie in our world, begotten by the devil, and repeated on the television, in the newspapers, in the classroom, by politicians, teachers, even parents, and sometimes even pastors. It is a lie that defies the first commandment. The lie is, “You can have it all.” The lie says you can have the fun, the success, the stuff and pursue your dreams with all your heart and you can still be a good Christian.

Think about our readings. The three men about to be thrown into the fiery furnace had to choose between their jobs and life, and on the other hand respecting God. The rich young man before Jesus had to choose between his blessed prosperity and his Savior. The Epistle reading told us, *“Even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. ‘Do not fear what they fear ; do not be frightened.’ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord”* (1 Peter 3:14-15).

No, we can’t have it all. God blesses us with much, yes. And he wants us to enjoy his blessings. But there daily come times when we must challenge ourselves to keep God in first place above and before all else; to tell the worldly voices that demand respect, the personal interests that want to consume our attention, the worldly answers that promise success, to tell them to get lost. We, by God’s Spirit living in us, desire to fear, love and trust God above all things. Amen.