

DISMANTLING OUR IDOLS--

False Gods--Visible and Invisible

Exodus 20:1-6; Hosea 13:2-6

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/dismantling-our-idols-false-gods-visible-and-invisible/>

Someone once wrote that the entire Old Testament story could be told as the tension between genuine faith and national idolatry. Of course, we are tempted to shake our heads, as if we are superior to "those ancient people." But just because our gods invisible doesn't make them less real. I heard a story about a young lady who refused her gentleman's proposal of marriage. "I can't marry you because of religious differences." He replied, "We're both Baptists!" "Yes," she said, "but I worship money and you're broke!" Invisible gods!

The late novelist David Foster Wallace once wrote that there is no such thing as not worshipping. We all worship something/someone. Augustine wrote that idolatry is worshipping anything we should use and using anything we should worship. (You can sense the implications here for Christian stewardship--how we relate to our possession and money). Augustine (in his *Confessions*) calls sin "disordered love," leading to misery and bondage. So, our drivenness to succeed, to be liked, our love of a good reputation, our addictions, our career, any and all could be gods.

Martin Luther said a god is anything we look to more than to Christ for satisfaction, joy, significance, hope and security. Anything we adore, serve and rely on more than God. And here may be the most subversive, invisible god of all--H. Richard Niebuhr said one of our gods is institutional religion, whereby people of faith try to manipulate God. I have a pastor-friend who nailed it. We were talking about this and he said, "We interpret scripture in light of our OTHER commitments." Ouch.

So let's look at the Exodus 20 text. The first two of the Ten Commandments are not the same thing. The first says we should have no other gods (visible or invisible) and the second, that we shall have no physical objects which take the place of God (vv. 3-4). The first commandment is what I call the "gateway commandment." As Luther wrote, we never break any of the other commandments unless we have first also broken this one. This second command was unique for its day and time. Every other nation and people group had their trinket gods.

Now here is something new I had not noticed before. Note the phrasing of v. 4: "You shall not make for yourself..." All idolatry is ultimately about self-worship, preserving the ego at all costs. Brennan Manning illustrates this beautifully. He writes, "I can be addicted to vodka or to being nice, to marijuana or to being loved, to cocaine or being right, to golf or to gossiping" [*Ragamuffin Gospel*, p. 85].

This is why freedom from idolatry begins at the Cross of Christ. We can't do this ourselves. Remember what Paul and others wrote in the New Testament. We cannot keep the law. God loves us, but we are sinners. Christ came and fulfilled the law through perfect obedience. He died for our sins. When we receive him into our lives, God's love and forgiveness become real to us, and we have new, supernatural desire and power to obey.

How well do you think God's people obeyed these commands about idolatry? Let's fast forward. The prophet Hosea was preaching some 500-600 years after Moses received these commandments (Hosea 13:2ff). Idolatry was still a huge issue. We don't learn, do we? As their nation was dying, he reminded them of the emptiness of false gods, of their inability to deliver on their promises. He asks, "Where are all the blessings, protection and satisfaction which your false gods promised? That's a question I could ask you. Then Hosea answers his own question, "Oh, wait, I remember! That promised security is like morning mist, like the dew on the grass; like chaff during wheat harvest; like chimney smoke. All there for a moment and then gone! No substance!" Aren't we all stunned when our false gods disappoint us, when they crumble?

Hosea reminds them that only God can satisfy (vv. 5-6). Experts talk about empty calories--they fill but do not nourish. So spiritually. False gods fill but fail to satisfy.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that there is no way to say yes to God without saying no to all of God's rivals [*An Altar in the World*, p. 139]. Following Christ always involves dismantling idols, saying no to sham gods. Daily. And that's a tough thing to do. But it's the gospel call.