

Don't Create Idols that Cannot Satisfy

Series: Where Life Flourishes: Engaging the 10 Commandments
Brad Bailey – July 3, 2016

Exodus 20:1-2 (NLT)

Then God gave the people all these instructions:² “I am the LORD your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery.

Exodus 20:3 (NLT)

“You must not have any other god but me.”

Exodus 20:3-6 (NLT)

“You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea.⁵ You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations of those who reject me.⁶ But I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands.

“An idol is anything more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life, or identity. It is anything we rest our heart in for security and significance more than God.” – Tim Keller

The Nature of Idolatry

1. Idolatry is the _____ of all other sin...and causes the deepest consequences.

Romans 1:21, 25

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him ... They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator.

2. Idolatry reflects “disordered love”...often making _____ things into something they are not.

3. Idolatry is essentially a _____ we have accepted... for idols will never satisfy.

Jeremiah 2:12-13

Psalms 135:15-18

The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by the hands of men.¹⁶ They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see;¹⁷ they have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths.¹⁸ Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.

4. Idolatry _____ us...because we become what we worship.

Identifying Our Idols

1. Where does my _____ take me?

2. How do I _____ ?

3. What about me can give me a sense of _____ over others?

Don't Create Idols that Cannot Satisfy

Series: Where Life Flourishes: Engaging the 10 Commandments

Brad Bailey – July 3, 2016

Intro

Today we are **continuing our series... *Where Life Flourishes... in which we are engaging the 10 Commandments.***

The 10 Commandments are the **10 instructions given to Moses...** whom God had called to lead the people of Israel whom he had chosen to reveal Himself. These were the foundational instructions to shape the life of those who God had brought out of slavery in Egypt.

They did not simply tell the people how to live...but they declared the nature of both God and how they (and we) can live aligned with our true nature,

Now I believe that many of us may have an aversion to the very word “commandment.” Some of us may feel “rules were meant to be broken”... we think of “commands as meant to be defied.”

We think that between us and the great open paths to pleasure... lies God... and He has rules...and if we accept that he is over life...then unfortunately... we “should” obey them... we have this weight on us called “duty.”

I propose that we have a profound misunderstanding. The truth is that we have some a limited grasp of our own nature and need... that we have the whole picture wrong...when it comes to he nature of freedom...and these instructions.

Story – When I was about 11 years old... my parents had me join the Boy Scouts...and I did a ‘stint’ in the Scots for about 2 years. When summer came... off I went to the annual Boy Scout camp at Emerald Bay on Catalina Island. Apparently they frowned on getting in a boat and going off to another part of the island...without permission. That sort of reflects how I related to rules. Years later I would begin to understand that the Boy Scouts were rooting boys in truths that I would have to struggle to learn.

Recently I found **one element from the Scouts that captures the nature of a whole different type of rules...or laws.** The official Boy Scout compass.

We do well to remember that **the compass has long been the basis of navigation.** Despite what one saw around them...and despite one’s personal “sense” of direction... a compass always reveals what is “true north”... and by that... the true way to reach one’s needed destination.

These 10 Instructions... are like God’s compass... for souls who have been enslaved too long.

If we are wise...we will sense that navigating life can be confusing.

Our own inner sense of direction is limited. There is also a radical shift to **new levels of individualism** in which whatever one believes... is considered all that matters. Having personal beliefs is considered by many today to be more important than what may actually be true. Today, many don't just respect someone for having an opinion...having an opinion is considered more important than whether such an opinion reflects truth.

So there can be a **world of individual ideas**...being shaped by media and music...with no clarity on what is really good and wise and fulfilling. It's natural to wonder **how we can navigate life with any clarity.**

And if we look around us for what might help us get our bearings...the landscape can be very confusing about what is true and good and right. There is a new level of **"pop culture"...** **carried by power of social media.** "Pop culture" refers to how certain things will emerge as popular...whether songs, or clothes, or positions about issues...not based on any thoughtful process...but merely by the channels by which attention spreads. There is a positive aspect of such "pop culture"...which is that we can all enjoy something that is familiar to us all...whether a song or a movie or a fashion trend. However, such **"pop culture" carries hundreds of messages every day** about what we should want or wear or pursue...with little real basis for defining what is actually good and true.

These 10 Instructions... are like God's compass... that which help define true north... beyond what we might be confused by around us...or when our limited sense of direction defies us.

These instructions bear that which transcends culture...and time...

As J. Johns notes...*"Barely three hundred words long in English, they form the foundation of the legal systems of the western world, are enshrined in the heart of our governmental structures and set out the values at the very core of our civilization.* In words so few they would fit in a small text box on a webpage or a palm-size article in a newspaper, this great arch of law encompasses family rights, property rights, the rights of the individual and even the rights of God. Human beings have multiplied laws and rules until it now takes endless volumes of books or terabytes of digital storage to hold them, yet all of our legislation is nothing more than the application to our culture of these 300 words."

The Bible describes the commandments as being **engraved on stone**; a compelling image of their **enduring nature.** Calling them enduring may not even be the appropriate way to speak of them...for it assumes they could have a shelf life... a beginning and end... when in truth...it may be that they are what stands permanent (within this created world) and we who do well to consider our own destiny.

Civilizations have come and gone... empires have risen and collapsed... kings, queens and emperors have come and gone but they have had no more impact on the permanence of the Ten Commandments than a few raindrops on a granite slab.

I believe **any good review of cultures and nations...** will find that wherever a culture has grown most rooted in these Ten Truths...it has flourished...and wherever it had been most adversarial to these truths...it has declined.

> **If we are to really hear these instructions... we will have to begin to grasp that they are not obsolete ... they are absolute.** They were not made for any particular period in history. They were made for human nature and therefore were commandments for all seasons, all centuries, all cultures.

They don't reflect **arbitrary rules** but **absolute reality**.

If the human soul wants to know how to live in the land of freedom...here it is.

We can see this in the very context by which God begins to speak ...

Exodus 20:1-2 (NLT)

Then God gave the people all these instructions: ² "I am the LORD your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery.

Recognize something very crucial here: God is not speaking into the lives of people who had been living in freedom and to whom he now wanted to bring into bondage...rather He is speaking to people that had been enslaved for 400 years...enslaved for generations.

One greater than all the powers has come...and rescued them.

You have lived so long in Egypt...in slavery... they didn't know how to live differently. They had never known the reality of true human rights...or human rest. Now God comes to set them apart into what life that is truly free. The 10 Commandments are about **how to thrive in freedom**...rather than survive in slavery. Now that you are free....I will declare how to live free."

It seems to me... **we can only grasp what freedom is...when we realize that we have been in slavery.** When we grasp that like the Israelites... someone has claimed to rule us and define us... to serve them. It is then that **the voice that loves us can define who we are.**

And so God begin...declaring that out of which they will be free...free to flourish.

Exodus 20:3 (NLT)

“You must not have any other god but me.”

God knows there is no other true God. He speaks as the one true and living God who created all that is...and in whom we were meant to live and breathe and have our being.

He is **our true center**...we are His alone.

If the earth did not maintain remain in the gravitational orbit of the sun...it would drift into darkness and cease to have life. So it is with us.

Apart from God **our identity is fragmented** into various attachments we make... student...worker... man / woman... but nothing that can declare who we really are. God alone is the true source and center out of which all **of life emanates**... who is **before all and above all....and declare who we are**.

The center does not change... we can only align with that center...or choose a false one.

And so God continues with what is generally considered the second commandment...

Exodus 20:3-6 (NLT)

“You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. ⁵ You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations of those who reject me. ⁶ But I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands.

He began with our need to make him alone our center...and **now He speaks to what is inherent and essential** to doing so...which is **NOT giving ourselves to what is not our true center**.

This is what IDOLATRY is.

As those who live as **part of a modern western culture**...we **may not associate ourselves** with idols and idolatry when we **think of the traditional forms** of carved statues placed on mantels.

(Though arguably the iPhone can seem pretty close.) But...the truth is...

The nature of idolatry is not the materials they are made of... but the devotion and power they are given.

As Tim Keller describes...

“An idol is anything more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life, or identity. It is anything we rest our heart in for security and significance more than God.” – Tim Keller

We develop idols out of anything we love, fear, or serve more than God.

Let's note a few other things about...

The Nature of Idolatry

1. Idolatry is the root of all other sin...and causes the deepest consequences.

In the Biblical Book of Romans the Apostle Paul shows that idolatry is not only one sin among many, but what is fundamentally wrong with the human heart:

Romans 1:21, 25

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to himThey exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator.

Paul goes on to list many of the sins that create misery and evil in the world, but they all find **their roots in turning what is created into what is central.**

The great Reformer Martin Luther said we never break the other commandments without breaking this one first. It is when there is something you feel you *must* have to be happy, that is more important to your heart than God himself...that we will lie... covet... steal. **We would not lie unless** first we had made something—human approval, reputation, power over others, financial advantage—more important and valuable to our hearts than the grace and favor of God.

Once we set that course it takes over our lives.

And God declares that this carries on into the future generations. God speaks of punishing the next generations... That is **not because God is vindictive or wants to punish** innocent people; it is **because idolatry has repercussions** that, unless God intervenes, roll on for years. I believe is best understood in the way he often describes how **he will give one over to their desire.** In other words...God will not remove the consequences ...they will fall upon those who follow.

Every parent knows this...it's what intimidates us...we know that we will pass along what we actually value...including what is not good. What the parents worship, the children will too. Our children are absorbing your deepest values every day. **Values are “absorbed” not taught.** Your children automatically **learn what is important in life by watching you.** Whole families, and generations, can be taken into captivity.

Here's the other side of that truth... if we live out of the true source of love... in relationship to God... His love will flow on to a thousand generations.

Paul's description in the text from Romans, also describes that idolatry is exchanging the Creator with creation.

2. Idolatry reflects “disordered love”...often making good things into something they are not.

We tend to think of idols as something bad. But as the Scriptures tell us...they are exchanging the role of the Creator for the creation...taking what is by itself good...but trying to make it more than it is ...turning goods into gods.

Augustine said that “the essence of sin is disordered love.”

We give a type of devotion that does not fit. We look finite limited elements to provide what only God can fulfill. The problem lies in redirecting our basic needs for God – as the source of ultimate authority... goodness...affirmation...trust... onto what cannot provide.

Tim Keller captures this in this potent definition of sin.

"Sin isn't only doing bad things, it is more fundamentally making good things into ultimate things. Sin is building your life and meaning on anything, even a very good thing, more than on God. Whatever we build our life on will drive us and enslave us. Sin is primarily idolatry."

And when we make something good in what it is...into something it is not... it will distort us...and destroy us. [1]

- If you center your life and identity on your spouse or partner, you will be emotionally dependent, jealous, and controlling. The other person's problems will be overwhelming to you.
- If you center your life and identity on your work and career, you will be a driven workaholic and a boring, shallow person. At worst you will lose family and friends and, if your career goes poorly, develop deep depression.
- If you center your desires in sex... you will seek affirmation in ways that will degrade you; and the deeper connection you seek will become even more elusive and leave you more empty.

- If you center your life and identity on a "noble cause," you will divide the world into "good" and "bad" and demonize your opponents. Ironically, you will be controlled by your enemies. Without them, you have no purpose.
- If we center our identity in our nation... the healthy and humble patriotism that can bless us... will become a nationalism marked by a false superiority... as **we attach the right to unalienable rights to our nationality rather than God.** [2]
- If you center your life and identity on morality... you will, if you are living up to your moral standards, be proud, self-righteous, and cruel. If you don't live up to your moral standards, your guilt will be utterly devastating.

3. Idolatry is essentially a lie we have accepted... for idols will never satisfy.

The truth is that our idols never satisfy us. They may give some temporary satisfaction...but they never truly satisfy what we long for.

Many years ago, an Old Testament prophet said,

Jeremiah 2:12-13 (NIV)

Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror," declares the LORD.
¹³ "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

We've all known that feeling...when we wonder, "Why did I buy that... do that... get so intent on achieving that?" What we thought contained our need... was leaking...and empty.

Or as the Psalmist says...

Psalm 135:15-18 (NIV)

The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. ¹⁶

They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; ¹⁷ they have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths. ¹⁸ Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.

They don't have the power to be what we hope for. God is source of deepest affirmation and love... authority and power... and is always present. Whatever we form that is not really what we hope for...will prove to have the form of a

mouth...but won't speak what we long for...will not hear what long for...will not offer life amidst death.

And that last line of the Psalmist says,..."those who make them will be like them"...which leads to the next point.

4. Idolatry defines us...because we become what we worship.

As was once said so pointedly, and is attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson ..

"The gods we worship write their names on our faces, be sure of that. And a man will worship something -have no doubt about that, either. He may think that his tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of his heart-but it will out. That which dominates will determine his life and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming."

How tragic but true this is.

Several years ago, Sports Illustrated told a telling story. It was the **tragic story of Rico Leroy Marshall, an eighteen-year-old senior at Forestville High School in Glenarden, Maryland.** It seems that Rico had everything going his way -- a scholarship to the University of South Carolina, a first place award in the school's talent contest, popularity among his peers. Rico was driving home from a school basketball game one Friday night when he was stopped by a county patrol car. On the seat beside him lay a bag containing several chunks of crack, a highly concentrated form of cocaine. To avoid arrest, he swallowed the drugs. Later that night he went into convulsions, and his parents rushed him to the hospital. Early Saturday morning Rico Marshall died. **On the wall of Rico's bedroom** was a poster of his hero -- a basketball star named **Len Bias.** Len was the **star of the University of Maryland basketball team** who was **drafted #1 in the NBA draft by the Boston Celtics.** The **night he was drafted, Len died** of an overdose of **cocaine.**

> **It's a tragic reminder of the power of idols to shape us.** Rico's model was Len Bias. I would guess that he **looked at that poster every day.** In fact, if Rico was like most teenagers, that poster was the **first thing he saw in the morning** and the **last thing he saw at night.**

Len was his hero. And he tragically **became what he worshipped.**

We do well to ask ourselves... **Who's on the poster on your wall?** I don't mean literally, but **who are you looking at?** Who do you want to become?

Let's conclude with an opportunity for...

Identifying Our Idols

I believe we all have elements in life that are rivaling for our hearts. Here are three ways that can help identify them.

1. Where does my imagination take me?

One way requires that we look at our imagination. Archbishop William Temple once said, "*Your religion is what you do with your solitude.*" In other words, the true god of your heart is **what your thoughts effortlessly go to** when there is **nothing else demanding your attention.?** What is it that occupies your mind when you have nothing else to think about?

Another way to discern your heart's true love is to look at...

2. How do I spend money?

Some of us who think we don't offer sacrifices at the alter ...might want to consider some of the things we have bought.

Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there is your heart also." (Matt 6:21) Your money flows most effortlessly toward your heart's greatest love. In fact, the mark of an idol is that you spend too much money on it, and you must try to exercise self-control constantly. This reveals our idols.

3. What about you can give you a sense of superiority over others?

Again, it may be a good quality...knowledge...beauty... success... personality ...but because it is a natural source of well-being...we can give it our devotion and power.

Conclusion

God's heart is that of a Father... whose love is so committed to us...that he suffers to see us give our hearts to what cannot satisfy...to what will exploit us.

He is passionate as a parent seeing their child go off with a stranger....but will not ultimately control them.

He is as passionate as a spouse who knows that is another picture in their wallet where only one should be.

Jesus has come to defeat the powers of this world that have ruled over humanity. He declared that in Him the kingdom of God had come...that God's rule was being inaugurated. He said it could be summed in by a story...we often refer to as the Prodigal Son. A father had two son...and the younger demands that he get his inheritance...in essence he wants the goods...and not the giver ...headed off to a distant land...far from home...to find himself...but ended up exploited... until "he came to his senses"...and came back to the Father where he was restored by the power of love...and his dignity.

Today...will we come to our senses?

It's about realizing what you long for is ultimately back home in God's presence. We will find freedom most...as we recognize that they cannot satisfy...but even more so...as we turn to God...and allow him to hold us... love us... place the ring of authority on us...and restore us...with the Voice that says: my son...my daughter. [3]

Resources: Have drawn some points from Tim Keller "How to Find Your Rival Gods" and Reasons for God (More developed in: Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters); Just10 by J. John, 2013, Philo Trust, UK

Notes:

1. This list includes some drawn from Tim Keller, The Reason for God (Dutton, 2008), pp. 275-276, and Tim Keller, "Talking About Idolatry in a Postmodern Age,"
2. Regarding nationalism, J. Johns says, Let me give an example of how this works with one very dangerous modern idol: nationalism. Now God made different peoples, ethnic groups and races. God obviously appreciates diversity and he delights in such differences. I have no doubt that it is a good thing to celebrate our culture, to love our nation and to be proud of it. It can give us worth, purpose, value and a sense of significance. Yet it is all too easy for those attitudes to slide over into something far nastier. If the race or the nation that we belong to starts to become the central feature in our lives then we must be careful. Once we start saying that we are better than our neighbours, or that any means justifies us beating them in sport or business, then we are in trouble. It is not hard to see where nationalism can lead you: you only have to look at Hitler's Germany, Rwanda in the 1990s or the simmering unease of the modern Balkans. (John, J.. just10 (Kindle Locations 224-227). Philo Trust. Kindle Edition.)
3. Note that in Col 3:1-5...it is noted that we don't just get rid of sin...but learn to be "Setting the mind and heart on things above" where "your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col 3:1-3) .That is what will replace the idols of your heart. If you uproot the idol and fail to "plant" the love of Christ in its place, the idol will grow back.