

Popular non-Christian novelist David Foster Wallace, not that long before he took his own life, had this to say in a commencement speech in 2005 to a group of college graduates of Kenyon College: “In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. . . . Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they are evil or sinful; it is that they're unconscious. They are default settings.”¹ To be human is to be a worshipper. We will see that to worship anything other than the One true God is in fact evil and sinful and anything we worship rather than him will eat us alive.

Turn to Exod 20. If you are a guest, welcome! We preach the Word here. Verse by verse, paragraph by paragraph, book by book. We're in the book of Exodus. Chapter 20. We'll be here all Fall. Three points: God speaks, God redeems, and God alone.

I. God Speaks **1** – God spoke. Dearly beloved, don't take those two words for granted. As Francis Schaeffer titled one of his great books: “He is There and He is Not Silent.” What a gift the Bible is. God has revealed himself. He didn't have to. He could have left us in the dark, not knowing who he is, who we are, what's wrong with the world, the solution, where it's all headed. But he is not that kind of God. He is a God who speaks.

II. God Redeems **2** – As we have seen, God redeemed his people from slavery in Egypt. Before he commands us what to do, he reminds of who he is and what he's done. Gen 15:7: “I am the Lord who brought you out from t Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” He is the Lord who brings out. He delivers then demands. That's the pattern of the gospel in the New Testament. **G** (not clean up). Front tire is deliverance back tire is demand. Like American Idol after winning.

III. God Alone **3** – This first commandment is foundation for all the rest. It really is an umbrella statement: cover it and you're good on the all the others. The other nine commandments are about activities, but this one is about relationship.² Its really the root of all the others because what you worship, that is, what you value most will determine your behavior.³

¹ Emily Bobrow, “David Foster Wallace, in His Own Words” (taken from his 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College), quoted in Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 34.

² DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments*, 32.

³ Tim Chester, *Exodus For You* (The Good Book Co., 2016) 176.

The Lord desires exclusive loyalty. Deut 6:4-5 is a foundational passage: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” It is like the phrase in the marriage vows: forsaking all others. The Lord wants exclusive loyalty. Love him and love him alone – with all that you are.

No “gods” before him. In truth there is only one true God. A repeated refrain through the whole OT there is no God but me. There is no other. / Think about it – before creation, there is *nothing*, then God speaks. *Ex nihilo*. As John Dickson says, “Monotheism is not just the Bible’s first commandment, it is its first thought.”⁴

But there are “so-called gods” – lower case “g.” 1 Cor 8:4-5 helps out: “Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ and that ‘there is no God but one.’ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’.” There is only One supreme Being. But then just a couple chapters later Paul says, “What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons” (10:19-20). “So-called gods” do exist – they are false gods. They are demons.

At the time of giving the Law, polytheism – the view that there are many gods - was just the norm. And they would mix them all up. The ANE world was extremely syncretistic. Various religions would combine all kinds of deities. It was a big problem in Israel. Josh 24:14-15: “Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”⁵ So in the pluralistic and polytheistic culture, God says, no other. No other god besides me.

Ok, so what does this mean for us? No false gods. No idols. When you hear the word idol, you probably think of Simon Cowell. Maybe you don’t think this applies to you. You are not tempted to bow down to any wooden statue or anything like that. Salon - Buddha. But the Bible’s teaching on idolatry goes much deeper. It is super sophisticated. Even back in the prophets, Ezekiel condemns the elders of Israel because “these men have taken their idols into their hearts” (Ezek 14:3). He doesn’t mean they have placed wooden figures in their chest. No, the heart in Scripture is the core of our personhood. It is the seat of our personality. It is motivational headquarters. So idolatry is not merely physical, but also spiritual. Not merely a matter of bowing the knees but yielding the affections.

The New Testament will use the language of desires, passions, cravings, lusts (not just sexual desire) to refer to our idols, our functional saviors, our counterfeit gods. Today, we use language like felt needs, expectations, wishes, demands, longings, drives. So I have bad news – every one of us is an idolater. We

⁴ John Dickson, *A Doubter’s Guide to the Ten Commandments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 49.

⁵ Still a problem at the time of Jesus. So he says in Matt 6:24: “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

just need to own it. The good news is Jesus died for idolaters. Jesus meets us where we are but he doesn't want us to stay there.

So, what is idolatry? Something or someone has become an idol when you will dishonor God to get it or you dishonor God when you don't get it. Sin to get it, sin when you don't get it. It is anything that has become more important to you than God. Frederick Buechner says

"Idolatry is the practice of ascribing absolute value to things of relative worth. Under certain circumstances, money, patriotism, sexual freedom, moral principles, family loyalty, physical beauty, social or intellectual preeminence, and so on are fine things to have around; but to make them the standard by which all other values are measured, to make them your masters, to look to them to justify your life and save your souls is sheerest folly. They just aren't up to it."⁶ Keller has a great book on idolatry called *Counterfeit Gods*. He defines an idol as "anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give."⁷ NCC 17: "Idolatry is trusting in created things rather than the Creator for our hope and happiness, significance and security.

So an idol can be a good thing that becomes too important, a good thing that becomes a god thing. It is when the gift eclipses the Giver. Idolatry is when we love some aspect of the creation apart from the Creator. Idolatry is the foolish mistake of asking a gift to be a Giver.⁸ It is anything we seek to build our lives on besides God, anything we look to for meaning and identity other than God, anything we hope will bring us joy and freedom besides God.

Idolatry is the sin behind every sin. Luther wrote a catechism to make disciples and in it he says we never break any commandment without first breaking the first: no gods before me. For example, you may lie. You break the Ninth commandment, but the question is why did you lie? Was it to look good? Self is the idol. Was it to save face? Reputation is the idol. Was it to benefit financially? Money is the idol. Was it to keep from hurting someone? Their feelings have become the idol. Idolatry reflects the motive behind every other sin.

We can turn anything into an idol! Calvin said our heart is a perpetual factory of idols.⁹ We just keep making them. It's like whack a mole. They just keep popping up. Philosopher David Naugle says, "Hardly anything in all creation has not been serviceable to us in taking God's place."¹⁰ Though we confess allegiance to the One true God, in everyday life we are practical polytheists.

For us, we are more tempted to make a good thing an idol, which makes them all the more difficult to detect. All sorts of people, places, and things can become idols: approval, comfort, health, control,

⁶ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 49.

⁷ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (), xvii.

⁸ Ortlund, *Deeper*, 101.

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:108.

¹⁰ David Naugle, *Reordered Love, Reordered Lives* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), xii.

reputation, success, security, pleasure, respect, beauty, body image, power, career, money, achievement, stuff, family, marriage, children, love, nation, theology, political ideology, technology, entertainment, even ministry. For guys, the typical idols are fame, fortune, and females.

God's will for us new covenant Christians is to avoid idolatry. 1 Cor 10:7: do not be idolaters. 10:14: flee from idolatry. Col 3:5 says we are to put idolatry to death. To kill it. That's what Christians do. The key to putting idols to death is first to identify the idols that tempt you. How can we identify our idols?¹¹ By asking some heart penetrating questions. These are painful. It hurts to get kicked in the idols, but focus in here for the next few moments, that you might make progress:¹²

- What will you sin to get? What thing or circumstance will you dishonor God in order to have?
- What will you sin if you don't get?
- Where do your thoughts effortlessly go? Daydream? When you lay your head down? William Temple said, "Your religion is what you do with your solitude."¹³
- What do you spend money on without thinking? What is it that you impulse buy? Those one click purchases? Jesus said where your treasure is, there your heart is. Your heart follows your money. You put your money where your heart is. You throw money at that which you love and then that spending trains the affections of your heart. Regardless of what you do on Sunday mornings, your bank account shows what you worship.
- What have you sacrificed most for?
- What makes you emotional? Look at your most uncontrollable emotions: anger, fear, despair, guilt, depression, worry, and anxiety.¹⁴ I love WTX. Skies. Dog runs away. Spot a fire 40 mi away. Augustine said that such emotions are smoke from the fires, rising from the altars of our idolatry. Follow the smoke and you'll see where the god-substitute is.¹⁵ Jared Wilson said that worry is the worship song we sing to our idols.
- What one thing do you most hope is in your future? Career? Salary? New house? Second house? Vehicle? Vacation? Marriage? Children? Successful children? Being loved and respected? Do the heart work. Are your loves disordered?
- What is it that, without it, life would hardly seem worth living?
- What is the thing you most worry about losing?
- Who is there in your life that you feel like you can't forgive, and why? Ex? Unfaithful spouse. Bad business partner. Parents. Bitterness is almost always tied to idolatry. Peter Leithart says, "Idols like company. Idolatry is inherently polytheistic."¹⁶
- Want others to know about you? When do you feel the most significant? Proudest?

¹¹ Keller, Greear, 71ff.

¹² [see Deeper 100, Gospel 72-75, Idols of the Heart 117.]

¹³ Quoted in Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 168.

¹⁴ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 169.

¹⁵ J.D. Greear, *Gospel* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2011), 75.

¹⁶ Peter Leithart, *The Ten Commandments*, 26.

- Where do you turn for comfort when things are not going well? Bury in your work. Sexual pleasure. Food. Alcohol. Drugs. Games. Gambling.
- What is your life organized around?
- What do you want? Jam 4:1-2: “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight”(NIV). Cravings are what drive conflict. You do what you do because you want what you want and when you want anything more than God and his glory – that is a violation of the first commandment. Col 3:5.
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Once you identify an idol, topple it. Kill it. Put it to death. Turn from it. 1 Thess 1:9: Turn from idols to serve the living and true God. Idols are bankrupt. Don’t believe the lie. They will not give life. They only take life. They lie. Idols are sprinkle-covered dog poop. Ever increasing craving with an ever-diminishing pleasure. They never satisfy. It’s like trying to quench your thirst with salt water or climbing to the moon on a rope of sand. Futile. Empty. Vain. Jer 2:12-13: “Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.”

I like to fish, but I rarely catch fish. Can’t wait for dove season so I can shoot at birds. Fish think they are about to get some big bright shiny lunch. They bite down and are sorely disappointed. Idols are baited fish hooks. They will let you down every time. Idols never deliver what they promise. Their checks bounce every time. They promise joy and end in despair. They promise freedom and make you enslaved. They are slave traders disguised as abolitionists. They never fail to fail. They always lead to disappointment or despair. Lewis:

“We may give our human loves the unconditional allegiance which we owe only to God. Then they become gods: then they become demons. Then they will destroy us, and also destroy themselves.”¹⁷ To quote a theologian a tad less sophisticated than C.S. Lewis, Alan Jackson put it? “Everything I love is killing me, Cigarettes, Jack Daniels and caffeine; And that’s the way you’re turning out to be; Everything I love, gonna have to give up, ‘Cause everything I love is killing me.”¹⁸ Don Herold said “Unhappiness is not knowing what we want and killing ourselves to get it.” You were made for God and God alone.

They are bankrupt and bogus. The prophet Isaiah mocks the futility of idolatry: **44:13-20, 45:5, 6, 14, 18, 21, 22-23**. Don’t be foolish. Don’t be short-sighted. Jesus is Lord. He is the only God that if you follow him will bring fulfilment in this life and eternal life thereafter. And he is the only God, who when you fail him will forgive you completely.

G 1 Cor 6:9-11: “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the

¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Inc., 1960), 19-20.

¹⁸ “Everything I Love,” by Carson Chamberlain and Harley Lee Allen, 1996 Universal. All Rights Reserved.

kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

Benediction: 1 John 5:21