Introduction
William Ernest Henley was a well-known poet in the late 1800s. He "*...contracted a tubercular disease that later necessitated the amputation of one foot. His other leg was saved only through the skill and radical new methods of the surgeon Joseph Lister, whom he sought out in Edinburgh. Forced to stay in an infirmary in Edinburgh for 20 months (1873–75), he began writing impressionistic poems (some in free verse) about hospital life that established his poetic reputation (Henley's long, close friendship with Robert Louis Stevenson began in 1874 when he was still a patient, and Stevenson based part of the character of Long John Silver in Treasure Island on his…hearty friend.)…Dating from the same period is his most popular poem, "Invictus" (1875)...*" (Britannica Website)

Out of the night that covers me
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance,
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

(*Invictus*, William Ernest Henley)

The impact of the poem's message has been diverse, to say the least from men like South African President Nelson Mandella, who recited it to fellow prisoners and held it up as a beacon of hope, to Oklahoma City Bomber Timothy McVeigh, who left as his last words a handwritten copy of the poem.

The illusion of self-reliance and self-determination is a favorite characteristic of American idealism and individualism and stories of such determination are a favorite genre of business leaders, politicians and average Americans alike. There's something in us that sees hope in one's mastery of their own fate regardless of the obstacles that stand in one's way. This impulse to frame our own story in sharp relief to what we've had to overcome is so compelling that some have even been known to fabricate such stories in order to gain public notoriety or influence.

Exodus 20:1-3 (verse 3)
These eight simple words make all the difference…

Worship Is An Unavoidable Expression of the Human Heart
The twentieth century concluded at a point in which many presumed the primitive religious fights that led to bloodshed and war were over only to be rocked back to reality by the events of 9/11. The greatest folly of the post-Enlightment man is the belief that we've outgrown our need for God. We've all heard Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead", yet only Nietzsche is dead and today, interest in religion is on the rise. In 2001, Neil Gaiman wrote *American Gods* in which the old gods or ancient and norse mythology battle new gods like technology, media,

pop-culture, and modern means of transport. Gaiman's point is that the gods have not died and the human impulse for worship has not waned, but merely what humanity worships has changed. In essence, we all worship something.

God, in His infinite wisdom and understanding of humanity as part of His creation, not only knows this, but He actually implanted this within us. As the saying goes, it's not a bug, it's a feature. Romans 1, which we'll look at more next week, tells the story of the human impulse to deny the worship of God. Paul says, "*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.*" (Romans 1:18–23) It's not worship with which humans have a problem; it's the object of their worship that presents the problem.

In their heart, mankind knows that happiness can only be found in something outside of themselves. According to Blaise Pascal, it is this pursuit that motivates all mankind. Regardless of the means, he says, "*they all tend to this end…yet,...no one without faith has reached the point to which all continually look.* He continues, "*What is it then that this desire and this inability proclaim to us, but that there was once in man a true happiness of which there now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present? But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself.*" (Pascal, Blaise; *Pensées*, pg. 113/Fragment 425)

True Worship Belongs Only to the One, True God

The sinful or depraved heart might hear in this first commandment one of self-seeking or self-aggrandizement, but consider for a moment what lies behind and before the people of Israel as they are gathered at the base of this mount in the wilderness. Behind them is Egypt with its untold number of gods for everything, some of which would have been direct targets of God's judgments through the plagues. After over 400 years of living there, the spiritual ecosystem of the Israelites was likely heavily influenced by the polytheism and religious pluralism of Egypt. Before them is the Promised Land, Canaan. In their cultural memory, Canaan was their ancestral home, but they were merely a clan of 70 people when they entered Egypt. Now, hundreds of years later, Canaan was teeming with lots of pagan cities and peoples who worshipped all manner of false gods. Therein lay a tempting draw to do just what they had done in Egypt which was to insert themselves in the land, attach themselves to its culture and do what they'd learn to do best: survive and thrive. This was not God's plan, however. Again, He had made them His people. Their thriving in the land would not be in spite of their obedience to Him, but because of it. His glory in their lives was not a stifling constraint, but a freeing hope. In Deuteronomy, we read of Moses' giving of this same law to the next generation of Israelites who

would conquer Canaan. He instructs them that, "*When your son asks you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your son, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us.*'" (Deuteronomy 6:20–25)

What if a far truer form of worship is obedience and not so much of what we probably imagine when we consider the idea of worship? Songs, teaching, public stuff…If we

What We Seek to Fulfill Us Is What We Worship

Does your worship cause you to deny your flesh and your worldly impulses and put on holiness? Just a few chapters prior this command we read of the grumbling of Israel, "*And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.*" (Exodus 16:2–3) Their desire was not the deliverance that God had provided, but the temporal fulfillment that Egypt could give. It shouldn't surprise us that this generation dies in the wilderness without realizing the promise of the Promised Land. Their hearts couldn't be satisfied by God's provision and God's promises. Their hearts wanted something altogether different and more tangible.

Jesus did not come to undo all of this. If we believed that, then we'd have an out for honoring God as our Lord. Instead, He came to fulfill the whole law and, by His righteousness, make us holy and insert into us a desire and capacity for worshipful obedience. Paul reminded the Corinthians of this. "*Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*" (1 Corinthians 6:19–20) Our purchase renders us God's Temple and there is to be no worship of alien gods in Jehovah's temple. Jesus never ignored the existence of needs in the lives of His people. He did, however, tell His hearers, "*But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*" (Matthew 6:33) Christopher J. H. Wright summed up the aim of the law as telling God's people that "*You must be a different kind of people because I am a different kind of God.*" (Wright, Christopher J. H.; Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament, pg. 203-204) This difference is seen in no clearer way than in our worship and that worship is demonstrated in what fulfills us. In short, where do you turn when you're feeling in need, depressed, empty, sad, or even joyous? If the answer to that question is anything that can be taken away, it's a false god. Most false gods are merely good things that we make into god things. Truth be told, "*…the all-sufficient glory of God, freely given in fellowship with himself through his sacrificed Son, is the stream of living water that we have thirsted for all our lives.*" (Piper, John; *The Pleasures of God*, pg. 8)

Conclusion

In the end, though, our stories really aren't our own. Henley gave himself the credit for his determination and fortitude with only a flippant nod to "*whatever gods*" made him so unconquerable. At the essence of our Christian faith, however, is the reality that there is an obstacle so great that we cannot overcome it in our own strength. We aren't actually the master or captain of anything when it comes to our fate or our soul. There is, instead, a sovereign God to whom we owe all things. The first commandment punches hard at this reality.

Last week, we set the table for the Ten Commandments against the backdrop that God rescued His people in order that they would worship Him and serve as priests before Him to all the world. As one author put it, "*He had not sent Moses with the ten commandments under his cloak to tell Israel that if they would keep the law, God would save them. Precisely the other way around. He saved them and then asked them to keep his law in response.*" (Wright, Christopher J. H.; Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament, pg. 192) Obedience to the commands of God is the outworking of this reality. We are not set free to live as masters and captains of ourselves, but as servants and followers of God's will.

Just before his death, Joshua warned the nation of their waywardness and tendency to violate the first commandment. "*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.*" (Joshua 24:14–15) This dichotomy is the challenge of every generation, every church, every family, every individual. Who will you serve? What gods do you need to put in subjection to the One, True and Living God? Will you surrender your fate and your soul to Him and Him alone?