

Second Altars – Part 1 “No Rivals”

Intro Prayer

Heavenly Father, we come before You today as a group of people who genuinely want to know You more deeply. We ask that You open our hearts and minds to receive whatever You have for us in this time together. Remove any distractions, any pride, and any preconceived ideas that might keep us from hearing Your voice clearly. Help us to be honest with one another and with You. May this discussion draw us closer to You and to each other. In Jesus' name, amen.

Summary

This sermon, titled "Second Altars," opens a new series exploring the danger of allowing anything to compete with God for first place in our lives. Drawing from Exodus 20:3-6, the message challenges listeners to recognize that God demands exclusive devotion, not because He is insecure, but because He is jealous for our well-being, our souls, and our salvation. Just as a spouse would not tolerate infidelity, God will not quietly allow us to divide our worship between Him and the idols we construct from our feelings, desires, or cultural pressures.

The sermon also addresses how we subtly reshape God into a version that suits our preferences, much like Thomas Jefferson edited miracles out of His Bible. Whether through pride, unforgiveness, cultural conformity, or selective theology, we can end up worshiping a God of our own making rather than the God of Scripture. The message closes with a call to examine our hearts for second altars and to return to the one true God, whose faithful loving-kindness endures for those who love Him and keep His commandments.

Key Verses

Exodus 20:3-6

Matthew 4:10

1 John 5:21

Jeremiah 2:13

Romans 1:22-23

Questions

1. The message described a 'second altar' as anything that competes with God for first place in our lives. What are some common second altars you see people setting up in today's culture?
2. In Jeremiah 2:13, God describes Himself as a fountain of living waters and contrasts that with broken cisterns that cannot hold water. What does this image communicate about the things we chase after instead of God?
3. The sermon pointed out that the Israelites adopted the gods of the people around them. In what ways do you feel pressure from your surrounding culture to adopt values or priorities that conflict with following God?
4. The message made a distinction between worshiping the God of the Bible and worshiping a version of God shaped by our feelings and preferences. How can we tell the difference in our own lives?
5. Romans 1:22-23 says people exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for images of corruptible things. How does this exchange happen gradually and subtly rather than all at once?

6. The sermon described God's jealousy as being rooted in His love for us, similar to how a spouse is protective of the marriage covenant. How does understanding God's jealousy as an act of love change the way you relate to Him?
7. Judges 2:11-15 shows that when Israel chased other gods, God allowed consequences to follow. Have you ever experienced a season where God used difficulty to draw you back to Himself? What did that look like?
8. The message closed by saying that no matter where you have been or what you have done, God's faithful loving-kindness calls you home. What makes it hard for people to believe they can simply come back to God without cleaning themselves up first?

Life Application

This week, take 10 to 15 minutes each day to quietly ask yourself this question: 'What am I serving most right now?' Look honestly at where your time, energy, money, and emotional attention are going. If you identify a second altar in your life, whether it is a relationship, a habit, a career goal, or even a distorted image of who God is, write it down and bring it to God in prayer. Ask Him to help you tear it down and to reorient your heart toward Him alone. Consider sharing what you discover with a trusted friend or someone in your group who can pray with you and hold you accountable.

Key Takeaways

- God commands exclusive devotion, declaring that no other gods should exist in His presence. This is not a suggestion but a foundational command that shapes every area of our lives.
- We can subtly create second altars by fashioning a version of God based on our feelings and preferences rather than on the full truth of Scripture, which includes His love, justice, holiness, and righteousness.
- God's jealousy is not rooted in insecurity but in His deep love for us. Just as a faithful spouse protects the marriage covenant, God pursues us because He knows what sin destroys and what His presence provides.
- When we chase after second altars, there are real consequences, as seen repeatedly in Israel's history. But God's discipline is an expression of love, not abandonment, and His faithful kindness is always ready to receive us when we return.
- Idolatry is not just an Old Testament problem. It is alive in the New Testament and in our lives today, taking the form of cultural conformity, pride, unforgiveness, and anything else we allow to take the place that belongs to God alone.

Ending Prayer

Lord, we thank You for this time together and for the truth of Your Word that does not change based on how we feel or what the culture around us says. We confess that we have all, at one time or another, set up second altars in our hearts. We have served our own comfort, our own image of You, or the approval of the world around us. Forgive us, Father. We ask that You help us tear down every competing altar and give You the first place in our lives that You alone deserve. Thank You that Your loving-kindness is faithful and that You call us home even when we have wandered far. Strengthen us this week to serve You and You only. In the name of Jesus, amen.