

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Lent Midweek 1 – February 21, 2024
Exodus 32:1-35 – The First Commandment
Rev Peter Wagner

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

As children, we learned the first commandment like this: “You shall have no other gods.” But that is not how it actually appears in Exodus 20. We always skip the words right before. The commandment actually starts like this, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.”

These opening words that we skip are perhaps more important than all the commandments that follow. Because they're the basis of all God's commandments. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” God is saying to Israel, “I am your God, I chose you to be my people, I saved you from Egypt. So serve and obey me, because I loved and served you first.”

As Christians, these words apply to us. In Christ, we are God's chosen race, his holy nation, a people for his own possession. The Lord our God has chosen us and saved us. He has brought us up out of the Egypt of this world, out of the house of slavery to sin. So since he first loved us, we should also love and trust in him and gladly do what he commands.

Therefore God's laws are not a burden for us. Not an oppressive obligation. The Ten Commandments are a gift. Like a boy standing around watching the men at work, until finally they give him a job and a way to help. He's thrilled. It's a privilege to have a God who loves us so much that he even gives us a way to serve and please him.

In other words, the Ten Commandments are based on the gospel. For the Lord is our God. We did not choose him, he chose us, and sent his Son to purchase us by his blood. Our Lamb went uncomplaining forth. He sacrificed himself as our Passover Lamb, to rescue us from slavery to sin. Our God does it all.

So why should we trust in anyone else? The Lord is our God, we need no other. Why should we look to anyone else, when our God already promises everything: forgiveness, life and salvation.

And yet we still chase after idols. Like the people of Israel, we make golden calves. The idols we worship may not be statues of stone, they may be less obvious. But that makes them all the more dangerous. We easily convince ourselves that we have no idols, that we do keep the first commandment. So we need to search our hearts, and ask ourselves sincerely. “Where do I put my heart and faith? And what can I not bear to lose?”

Would you be miserable if all your possessions were gone? Then stuff is your god. Do you live in fear of our increasingly corrupt government? Then government is your god. Would you despair if there was no cure for a disease you or a loved one faced? Then health is your god.

Concerning the god of money, Luther writes in the Large Catechism, “Many a person thinks that he has God and everything in abundance when he has money and possessions. He trusts in them and boasts about them with such firmness and assurance as to care for no one. Such a person has a god by the name of ‘Mammon,’ on which he sets all his heart. This is the most common idol on earth. He who has money and possessions feels secure and is joyful and undismayed as though he were sitting in the midst of Paradise. On the other hand, he who has no money doubts and is despondent, as though he knew of no God. For very few people can be found who are of good cheer and who neither mourn nor complain if they lack Mammon. This care and desire for money sticks and clings to our nature, right up to the grave.”

Idolatry is in our bones. Even the obvious idol of money, an idol we've been warned about time and again, if we're honest, we see how much we still love and trust in it.

“Be gone, Satan!” Do not tempt us with mammon, or anything else. “For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve!’”

Worship the Lord, and flee from idols. For idolatry cuts us off from God. It calls him a liar. God has declared that he is our Lord, but we say no thanks.

How angry God was when the children of Israel so quickly fell into idolatry! Even while he was speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, even while God was writing the first commandment on the tablet of stone with his own finger, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, you shall have no other gods,” at that same moment Aaron and the people were fashioning a golden calf. “These are your gods, O Israel, who

brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

And so, while the people were bowing down to an idol and carousing in orgies, God watched in fierce wrath. He said to Moses, “Let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.”

Only because Moses interceded for the people, did God relent. Only because Moses pleaded on their behalf God did not wipe them out that day.

So take idolatry seriously! Fear God’s wrath, and pray for his mercy. Restore us, O Lord. Forgive us. Be our God, and make us your people once again. Save us from our idolatry by your mighty hand. Teach us to fear, love, and trust in you alone.

Teach us the right attitude towards money, government, healthcare, and everything else you provide. Teach us to see it all as your gracious gift. Do not let us put our trust in princes, but teach us to pray to you for good government, trusting your control over the nations. Teach us that our health, even our lives, all of it is in your hands. Not one hair falls to the ground without your knowledge. Even the sufferings you send us are for our good.

Teach us to trust you, O Lord. To receive whatever you send with thanksgiving. And show us how you work through human institutions, through doctors, public servants, soldiers, and workers, to care for us. All these people are instruments of your will. So do not let us trust in them as idols, but show us your hand working through them.

Turn us from idolatry, O Lord. And forgive our sins. For we deserve as much wrath as unfaithful Israel. Perhaps even more, because we try to conceal our idolatry from you. We imagine that you overlook our sin, that you are ignorant or don’t care. But your commands are no joke. So have compassion on us, and do not strike us down. Restore us and keep us as your beloved people, O God.

And listen, O Lord, to the words of our intercessor. Listen to Jesus, who pleads for us like Moses pleaded for Israel. “Alas,” said Moses, “This people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin – but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.” And Christ pleads for us like him. Our Jesus was blotted out for our transgressions. He took them all to the cross, where your wrath fell upon him.

Therefore, for his sake, O Father, for the sake of our living Savior, the one who was and is and is to come, your only begotten Son, for the sake of his blood that he poured out on the cross, do not blot us out. For he is our Lord, he is our God. All our fear, love, and trust belong to Christ forever. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.