

I: Having No Other Gods

If you have a bible, go with me to **Deuteronomy chapter 5**. If you're joining us for the first time this morning, we have spent the past three weeks talking about the idea of *morality*, or how we think about right and wrong as human beings. We've tried to lay a bit of a foundation by asking the question, "what are the determining factors at play in how we think about morality?" What things *influence* the way we think about morality and those responsible for *determining* morality. And we've talked about how all of that might impact the way we approach an ancient set of commandments like the Ten that we find in the Old Testament.

If you're just joining us for the first time today, I would *highly* recommend that you go back and listen to the past three weeks, because those are obviously foundational for the things we'll talk about in the rest of this series. We'll also reference some of those three weeks moving forward, so it'd be helpful for you to catch up on. But today, we finally get to what this series is really all about: the commandments *themselves*. I mentioned this last week, but the commandments are found *first* in Exodus, then reiterated in Deuteronomy. We're going to start things off by looking at the first commandment in Deuteronomy 5, v. 6-7. These are God's words starting in v. 6:

6 "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. 7 "You shall have no other gods before me.

So first, notice that this command *starts* with a reminder of who he is and what he's done. We talked briefly about this last week, but when God *initially* gave the Ten Commandments to the nation of Israel (in Exodus), it was less than two months after freeing them *from* Egypt, where they had been enslaved for around 400 years. So at the time, they were fresh out of a very long time in a nation with a very solidified culture. Israel did not have their own culture, their own norms, their own way of life. They had been heavily *influenced* by, and pretty much an indistinguishable *part of*, Egyptian culture.

Which means that part of God bringing them out of Egypt was God calling them to leave *behind* many of those *old* ways of life. God was trying to re-establish them as their *own* people with their *own* culture. And *particularly*, their perception of what is right and what is wrong. And **at the center of it all was God wanted the Israelites to recognize *him* as the one *true* God, and not worship all the other *various* gods that the Egyptians worshiped.** In fact, if you're familiar with the story of the Exodus, you know that there was a series of *plagues* God sent on Egypt when Pharaoh wouldn't let the Israelites go.

What you may *not* know is that each of those plagues were God *demonstrating* how much more powerful he was than the various gods of Egypt.

So the Egyptians had a god named Osiris who was thought to be the god of the Nile River. The belief was that the Nile River was his bloodstream. So in one of the plagues, God showed his power *over* Osiris and turned the Nile River into literal blood. There was another Egyptian god named *Heget*; the goddess of fertility. She was usually depicted with the head of a frog. And *because* of this, Egyptians viewed *frogs* as sacred. They would never kill a frog; there were *laws* against it. But in one of the plagues, God sends so many frogs on Egypt that people couldn't even move without stepping on one. There was another Egyptian goddess named Hathor. She was the goddess of protection, often depicted with the head of a cow. In another plague, God sends disease on all cows in Egypt causing them to die in *droves*, which had massive ripple effects on society. Egyptians worshiped *Ra*, the sun god. In another plague, God shows his power over Ra by sending three days of complete darkness over Egypt.

We don't have time to list them all right now, but every single one of the ten plagues were a way of God asserting his supremacy and power over all these Egyptian gods, which actually weren't gods at all. He's showing that going to these other *false* gods for protection or provision is completely futile and pointless. He's flexing on these false gods one by one before their very eyes. All of the plagues were a strategic attack on the false gods of their day. *God* is saying, "I am the one with true power. I am the only *true* god, and all the other gods out there are a sham."

And here, in the first commandment, he makes that idea into a command. He tells the Israelites that they shouldn't have "any other gods before him." And he *prefaces* with an assertion in v. 6: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." That is the premise for *all* the commandments that follow, the premise of *who God is*, but *especially* for this first one of having no other gods before him. He says "because of *who I am*, and *what I've done*, I've shown you should have no other gods before me."

So, when I was little, I used to absolutely *hate* hearing people say, "because I said so" in response to being asked, "why?". If you listened to my teaching from last week, that's probably not surprising. To me, that just felt like a *cop-out*. It didn't feel like a very sophisticated or clear answer, and all it did was make me feel *more* sure you didn't even have a reason for whatever you told me. So I told myself when I *became* a parent or put in a position of authority, I would *never* use phrases like "because I said so." *Never*. And before working here, I was a childcare site director, and let me tell you how unbelievably

easy it is to say, “because I’m in charge.” And now that I’m a parent, I can also see how hard it will be to not say it once my son starts questioning me in ways that I feel are silly.

But here’s the thing: I have a *perspective* now that I didn’t have as a kid. Now that I am a parent, I feel like I have a new understanding for what it means to *be* a parent. I now tangibly understand that I would do absolutely anything to protect and care for my son. I am also abundantly aware that I am unbelievably smarter than him. Just this morning he spat up then rolled in it, seemingly on purpose.

So when I heard people say “because I said so,” or “because I’m your parent,” when I was a kid, here’s what I think they *meant*: “I am your parent. I have given more of my life, energy, resources, sleep, blood, sweat, and energy to help you than any other human has. Your mother and I, quite literally, have been the sole reason you’ve stayed alive, despite all of your efforts to the contrary. I know so much more about you than you *currently* know about yourself. And because of all *that*—because of who I am and what I’ve done for you—the fact that it’s *me* asking you to do something is a *great* reason for you to listen to me.” And I get that not everyone had great parents, or even good parents, but I think the logic still stands.

That, I would argue, is a smaller version of what God is saying to Israel in v. 6. He’s saying “as a reminder, here’s who I am, and here’s what I’ve done for you. Now in light of *that*, I want you to have no other gods before me. And to be honest, the fact that it’s *me*—the God who brought you out of Egypt and saved you—is a *great* reason for you to listen.

So here, I just want to briefly *recap* something that I mentioned last week, because it is so important that it bears repeating. In the Christian life (which the story of the Exodus is sort of a *prototype* of), **salvation always precedes obedience**. It *precedes* it. God *does not* say “I want you to *obey*, so that you can *earn* your acceptance and salvation with me.” He *saves* his people first, and *then* he calls them to obey as a response. That’s so important for us to get, because if you get that order reversed, you actually have ventured into an entirely different *religion*; you’re no longer talking about Christianity at all. And *here* in this passage, it’s no different: God says “I *saved* you—I brought you out of Egypt. *Therefore, in light of that, here’s how I want you to live.*”

In this case, the command is to “have no other gods” before him. Now, if you can remember back to two weeks ago, when we unpacked the five different “categories” of morality: *this* command (“have no other gods before me”) **is a command that assumes the authority and loyalty moral categories**. It is a call to ultimate *trust* and *loyalty* and *fidelity* to the God of the bible. So when you first hear this command, it might sound like

God's saying "no *polytheism*": *don't have any other gods*. Or, at least if you *do*, just make sure I'm the most *important* one. But that's not exactly what he's saying.

When God says "you shall have no other gods before me," that phrase *before me* could be translated "in my presence," or "in my face," as well as "first." What God is actually saying is that no god, no person, and *nothing* comes before me in your life. *Nothing* else is worthy of your time, attention, effort, and worship like *I* am. That's the heart behind the first commandment.

So to help us with this, I want us to look at one other passage in the bible that gives us a *metaphor* for how this works. We'll put this one on the screen for you. This is **Jeremiah 2**. In context, this is *God* speaking through the prophet Jeremiah. Here's what he says:

*Has a nation ever **changed its gods**? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their **glorious God** for **worthless idols**. Be appalled at this, you heavens, and shudder with great horror," declares the Lord. "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**.¹*

Okay, so here, God is employing a *metaphor* to try and communicate just how absurd of a choice it is to have other gods you worship instead of him. And to do that, he employs the metaphor of *water*. *In the ancient world, there were two primary ways of obtaining drinking water. One is that you could live by a stream or a river or a spring—that's what Jeremiah here calls "living" water. It was moving water. Consistently fresh water. That was the best way to make sure you have good water to drink. But most people didn't have the luxury of living near a spring or a river. Instead, they had to use a "cistern," which was essentially just a large bowl or bucket that you would set outside to collect rainwater.*

But think about the last time *you* left something outside that ended up collecting rain water over several days. Okay—would you describe that as water you would want to *drink*? Probably *not*, right? This was a much *worse* way of accumulating water because it would get *stagnant and gross*. So using *those* two images, God says worshipping *other* gods is sort of like if you had the ability to collect water from a spring of *living* water, and instead decided to hew out a cistern for yourself to collect *stagnant* water instead. In other words, it's a *bizarre, nonsensical* decision to make. *And* he says, it's not even like it's a *good* cistern—it's *broken*, and doesn't hold water for very long. That's what it's like when we turn to something *other* than God to satisfy our spiritual "thirst."

¹ Jeremiah 2:11-13

So here, God is using “thirst” as a metaphor for something like our “inner emptiness.” All of us are born with an inner *emptiness*: a sense of feeling incomplete, unsatisfied, discontent. The Scriptures teach that we are born that way because we are born *alienated* from a relationship with the true and living God. And, we’re told, we all *will go to someone or something*, to quench that thirst. To fill our inner emptiness. Everyone builds their life on *something*. And *ultimately*, as Jeremiah says, there are only *two* options: you can pick *God*, or you can pick something else. And **whatever that “something else” is, that thing functionally becomes a “god” to you.** You may not *call* it that, but that *is essentially what it is*. And what’s interesting is that the authors of the bible aren’t the *only* ones to make this observation.

David Foster Wallace, the late novelist and professor—who wasn’t a follower of Jesus—famously put it this way in a commencement speech he gave. *He* said:

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. 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 own 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 plant you. [...] Worship power—[and] you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart—[and] you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And so on.

Do you see what he’s saying? And he just listed out three or four examples there. He’s pointing out the very thing that the *Scriptures* teach over and over and over again: that *all* of us have functional “gods” in our life. Things that we seek out to find meaning, purpose, joy, contentment, life *in*. He *also* says in that same speech that a great reason to worship, in his words, “God or Allah or some other spiritual-type thing” (remember—he wasn’t a Christian), “...is that pretty much anything *else* you worship will *eat you alive*.” What he means is that *other* gods we worship will eventually run our lives *completely*. They will drag us along, wear us out, exhaust us, and burn us out. Because they are “broken cisterns.” This is why the African church father St. Augustine said it like this: *God, our hearts will not rest, until they rest in you.*

~~This is actually one piece of evidence an author I really like named Francis Collins uses to argue for the existence of God in his book *The Language of God*. He says, “[We don’t~~

~~have] desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. People feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. Why do we have a 'God-shaped vacuum' in our hearts and minds unless it is meant to be filled?"~~ We were made to worship God, and simply nothing else will do. So God says, "have no *other* gods."

Now, practically: I think there is a *reason* that this command is given *first* in the list. I think that's strategic. The Reformer Martin Luther, back in the day, had a fascinating observation about the first commandment. He said, essentially, that if you *don't* break the *first* commandment, you *won't* break any of the other ones. And if you *do* break one of the *other* commandments, that means somewhere along the line, you've already broken *this* one.

Let me try and show you what he means there. If you *lie*, *why* are you lying? Well it's most likely because in that moment, something has become more important to you than telling the truth. Some success that you can obtain by lying, some approval in the eyes of your peers, some outcome you can secure for yourself if you lie, some *comfort* you can maintain—*something*, in that moment, has begun to matter more to you than the approval of God. So you *lie*. Why do you *steal*? Because in that moment, I am not resting in God or trusting in his provision for me. We've forsaken the fountain of living water, and turned to a broken cistern.

So this means—and this is important that we realize this about ourselves—**all of our behaviors are actually symptoms**. If you have a genuine delight in God, and you enjoy him as the living water that he is, then the resulting behaviors will be things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. If you have a *failure* to enjoy God, it will result in behaviors like *anger, worry, lust, selfishness, self-righteousness, pride, rebellion, drunkenness, envy, greed*.

But in order to get anywhere—whether that's *embodying* the healthy behaviors or *remedying* the negative ones—you have to realize that they are symptoms. Symptoms of either accepting God as the fountain of living waters, or of forsaking him and chasing after broken cisterns. Anytime we sin, something else has gone wrong before it happens. Something else is *functioning* as a god in our life. And once we realize that, we actually have an avenue to dealing with it. All of that is the heart and substance of the first commandment.

And almost always, throughout human history, this has coincided with the worship of alternative, false *gods*. That probably seems like odd language to us, because we don't tend to think about it in those terms. But in *most* human civilizations, worship of various gods has been commonplace. We already talked about how that was the case in ancient *Egypt*, with the various gods *they* worshiped. But it was also true in the time of Jesus, in first century *Greek* and *Roman* societies.

They worshiped *Plutus*, who was the god of prosperity and money. If you *wanted* prosperity and money and abundance, you would go to the temple of *Plutus*, you would make offerings, in the hope that he would deliver those things into your life. They worshiped *Athena*, the goddess of wisdom and politics. They had *Aphrodite*, the goddess of sexuality and beauty. They had *Nike*, the goddess of victory. They had *Bacchus*, the god of drinking and partying. And plenty more where those came from. But all of these “gods” were actually a *means* to something else. You would go to their temples and worship them because you believed by doing so, you could obtain something you wanted: whether that was prosperity or power or sexual allure—or whatever was most important to you.

I tell you that because I think sometimes we tend to look down our noses at other societies, both then and today, that have “gods” set up like this in their culture. We tend to think *we* have evolved and progressed *past* primitive practices like that. But really, we *want* the same things they wanted, and we tend to *worship* things just like they did—we just don't think of them as literal gods when we do it. That's the only real *difference* between us and them: we just don't give *our* gods proper names. Let me try and prove it to you.

I want us to do a thought experiment. Imagine for a moment that a person from ancient Greek or Roman society could transport themselves through time and history, and plop themselves down in modern 21st century American culture. How do you think they would perceive some of the things that they would witness in our world? So let's just say, for instance, that they rolled up to the Tennessee/Florida game last night. They look around them, and they see people all dressed in the same colors, some of them painting their faces and their bodies in support of their team. *Millions* of dollars being redistributed. Somewhere around a hundred thousand people all chanting and singing in unison.

The *winning* team celebrates on for the entire next week, and the losing team goes into a time of *mourning* in sackcloth and ashes until the next game where they do it all over again. I think an ancient person would witness all of that and go “oh, your society *also* worships *Nike*—the goddess of victory.” And we'd say “oh no, no no—we're *way* more enlightened than that. We've made so much progress since then.” And then they would

go “oh okay, well what’s that *swoosh* mark on each team’s jerseys, then?” And we’d go “well, it’s *Nike*—but that’s totally different. It’s not what you think it is.”

They would see our society’s *obsession* with constantly buying newer and better things. They would see shopping malls and Targets that are basically designed to look like temple *shrines*, with bright lights and sounds everywhere. They would scroll through the endless maze that is Amazon, and see how much stuff we buy and how annoyed we get when it takes more than two days to arrive at our house. They would see the millions of people in our society in tens of thousands of dollars of debt to buy things that, on the whole, they don’t actually need. They’d see all of that and they’d go, “oh! You too worship the God of *Plutus*, the giver of wealth and abundance.” And we would go, “oh no, we’ve progressed so much; we would never do something primitive like that.” Right before we swipe our credit card one more time at the cash register.

They’d go to some of the bars downtown or on the Strip on a weekend,, where they’d see hundreds if not thousands of men and women pour into rooms where they can be served drink after drink after drink. They’d see people spend large amounts of their budgets on alcohol and partying. And then they’d see the way those people act and interact with others once they’re drunk. And they’d probably think “okay—so you all *also* worship the God of Bacchus—the God of alcohol and partying!” And we’d go “oh no—not us, we’d never do anything primitive and silly like that.” Right before we stumble to the bar and order another drink.

They’d see our dating apps, where many of us spend hours a day swiping one way or another, fervently hoping that we can find one person who is hot enough, and not too *creepy*, to hook up with. They’d find out about the multi-billion dollar porn industry, that has millions of men and women *enslaved*. They’d see the amount of time people in our culture spend accessing websites where they watch other people have sex. They’d see all of that, and they’d go “oh—you guys worship the god of *Aphrodite*, the goddess of sex and sensuality!” And we’d go “oh no, no—we’re way more evolved and enlightened than that.”

My point is that if a person from an ancient culture could see the things that you and I give our money, our resources,our time, our attention to, they would not only conclude that we *worship* the same gods they do...but that we’ve actually *enhanced* the worship of those false gods. We’ve found ways to make worshipping those gods *easier*, more *efficient*, and more *accessible* than ever. We just don’t give those gods *names*. The *truth* of the matter is that you and I continue to believe, just like all human beings who have ever lived, that other things than God have a kind of *salvific*

power. We functionally believe that *they* can save us. From *unhappiness*. From *monotony*. From *boredom*. Or from whatever it is that we want saving *from*.

And the *problem* is, just like the false gods of Egypt, and Greece, and Rome, **these false gods cannot actually do what we want them to do**. But for most of us, when they *don't* deliver what we thought they would deliver, we don't just *stop* trying to squeeze life out of them. We typically try even harder. Or we pivot to a *different* false god in hopes that that one will be more successful. So in effect, these false gods leave *us enslaved*. *Mastered* by false gods that care nothing about us and can never deliver what they promise, but we keep looking because we have an insatiable desire for *something* to satisfy us.

If your whole identity is based on your spouse or partner, you're going to be emotionally dependent, jealous, and controlling. Your partner's problems and shortcomings will always feel overwhelming and earth-shattering to you. Center your life and identity on your *family* or your kids, and you're going to try to live your life *through* your children until they eventually resent you because they couldn't bear the weight of your crushing and exhausting expectations.

Base your identity on *work* and *career*, and you'll be a hyper-driven workaholic, and a boring, shallow person in any context *outside* of work. You'll lose family and friends and community because they're all obstacles to be avoided on the path to career success. Center your life on *pleasure* and *gratification* and *comfort*, and you'll find yourself addicted to *something*—whatever it happens to be that you use to escape the harsh realities of life. Center your life on *relationships* and the approval of others, and you'll constantly be overly hurt by criticism, and you'll feel like you're always losing friends. You'll fear *confronting* others, and you won't be able to be *helpful* to your friends when it really counts.

Center your life on some noble cause, and you'll end up dividing the world into “good” and “bad” people. You'll end up demonizing anyone who diverges from your cause. Ironically, you'll end up being *controlled* by your enemies—because without them you have no real purpose. Center your life on religion and morality, and you will, *if* you're living up to your standards, become prideful and self-righteous and cruel towards others that don't measure up. And if you're *not* living up to your standards, your guilt and shame will be *devastating* to you. Do you hear the problems with basing your life on anything except God? They're simply not going to work. They'll *all* eat you alive. *Nothing* that is created will bear up under the weight of providing *lasting* identity and meaning.

So here's where I want to land this morning. I want to just help give you some practical ways to figure out what "gods" you might currently be trusting in. Some practical ways to discern what we currently look to for meaning, purpose, identity, and satisfaction. And I've got a handful of questions that are going to help us diagnose that. These would be really good for jotting down and wrestling with some on your own, and they'd probably be even better to jot them down and answer in community in the context of your LifeGroup later this week. But here they are:

- **What do you most easily sacrifice for?** Remember: the way worship works is that it demands *sacrifice*. Whether that's money, time, energy, effort...or maybe *all* of the above? What do you most naturally and easily *sacrifice* to obtain? Chances are that at least gets you close to discovering what "gods" you serve. *Second...*
- **What does your mind most easily gravitate toward?** When you're bored and have nothing else to think about...where does your mind run? What consumes your thought life? What do you think about most, *worry* about most, obsess over most often? *Third...*
- **What do you most want people to know about you?** If you're in a social setting with new people, what's the thing you try to float out there? What's the topic you hope comes up so you can share your opinion or make your prowess known? What do you most want people to know about you?

And with each of these questions, once you've answered them, I want you to ask: *why?* *Why* do I most easily sacrifice for *that*? *Why* does my mind most easily gravitate *there*? *Why* do you most want people to know *that* about you. I think if you can honestly wrestle with those questions, you can at least get pretty close, maybe with the help of community, to discerning what your functional "gods" are. So I'd encourage you to spend some time with those questions, and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you *anywhere* that you might be "putting other gods before God *himself*."

And then, to ask how you might look to God for meaning and life and purpose instead. **Because here's the good news. Where every other god—every other source of meaning and purpose and identity—comes up *short*...God does *not*. He is, as Jeremiah says, the "fountain of living waters." He's the cistern, the *well*, that never runs dry. He's *the source* of *lasting* meaning, purpose, identity, satisfaction, life, and joy. He's the God who will not enslave us, but rather will set us free. He's the God who brought his people out of Egypt, and *can* bring you and I out of every single predicament our sin has trapped us in. He is capable of all of that. His desire is to be for us what every false god can never be. And he has *proven* himself to be that over and over and over again. So all that he asks of you and of me is that we take him at his word on it. The only thing he asks is that we *trust* in**

that reality and, day-by-day, align our lives *with* that reality. This is why the first of the Ten Commandments is so incredibly helpful to us.

And maybe as we listed out those questions, the Spirit has already brought something to the front of your mind—something that you are prone to look to for some of all of those things, instead of God. And if he has, let me tell you the *first* thing you're gonna want to do with that information. I'm going to invite you, in just a moment as we sing, to come to the communion table. And I want you to take the bread and the cup. And as you do that, I want you to remember something—maybe even speak it over yourself as you eat.

I want you to remember that even though we constantly trade God for other things...God made a trade of his own. The Scriptures tell us that "God made him who *knew* no sin, to *become* sin for us, that *we* might become the righteousness of God in him." When we follow Jesus, we are reminded that no false god satisfies like Jesus, and no false gods can keep us *from* Jesus when we are *in him*. So we come to the tables, we lay down our *broken* cisterns, and we receive the fountain of *living* waters, who was broken for *us*.

Let me pray for us, and then we'll respond.