

NO OTHER GODS

EXODUS 20:1-3

And God spoke all these words, saying: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

You shall have no other gods before Me.

Once, a pastor was taking a special offering for the church building fund.

Suddenly, the owner of the local tavern jumped up, and shouted, "Pastor, I'll donate \$5000." Of course, this was the pastor's worst nightmare...

This pastor was a man of integrity, and he knew it wouldn't be right to accept money for God's work that he knew had come from the sale of alcohol?

Reluctantly, the pastor declined the tavern owner's offer. He told the man, "Sir, I'm sorry, but as much as the church needs that money, I can't accept an offering from liquor proceeds." That's when one of the church members, sitting in the back of the church, spoke out, "Take it, Pastor – it's our money, anyhow."

Evidently, the people of the church had compromised their convictions – and the pastor was tempted to do the same. Compromise is an evil all Christians face.

It doesn't matter if you're an usher, or teacher, or singer, or preacher - this coming week we all will be tempted to compromise our morals, and convictions, and character. All Christians have to deal with the temptation to compromise.

And compromise leads to death and destruction. Guys, understand, that compromise with sin – or compromise with the devil - is only an illusion.

The devil only presents the choice as a compromise. In reality, he

wants it all.

He wants to ensnare your heart, and life, and future, and hope. His desire is to entrap you and deface you, and defile you, and destroy you. He hates you. In the end, any compromise with sin is no compromise at all. It's utter defeat.

Compromise is a spiritual pirate. It's the ransacking of a believer's treasure and strength and valuables. It's a temple robber. It enters the temple of your spirit, and steals away your devotion to God, your love for God, the blessings of God.

It's been said, "Compromise is like paying the cannibals to eat you last."

But here's how you guard against compromise – you decide in advance the issues in your life that are *non-negotiables*. My friend in Austin, Texas, Allen Rigg, calls them "ADMs – advanced decisions made". Commitments forged beforehand.

We'll resist the urge to compromise if we decide in advance on a few absolutes in our life where we won't *hedge* – some footholds where we won't *budge*.

These are the resolutions of heart, and the deliberations of conduct that make up our character – that constitute our integrity. Your non-negotiables are what separate you from the rest of the world. They're what make your life a shining testimony for Jesus Christ. The non-negotiables are the jewels in your crown – your spiritual treasure – your *valuables*. That's why we call them *values*.

You may have materials possessions and accumulations – things, and toys, and assets, and deposits, and trinkets – but you've decided to put them in their place. You're not going to let stuff become your God. *You worship one God.*

You may not worship Him as much as you'd like, and often get distracted, but when you worship God you worship Him the way He desires – *no graven images*.

Your language might not be as pure as you'd like, and you're asking the Holy Spirit to control your tongue. An idle or raunchy word might slip out at times, but you've decided that your mouth will *never degrade or profane the Lord's name*.

You're a busy person. Your mini-van has magnetic footballs, and soccer balls, and cheerleader megaphones all over the tailgate. You've agreed to cart the kids to just about any practice, anywhere, at any time. But there's one non-negotiable. You're not going to sign up for an activity that'll take your family out of church on a regular basis. You're *keeping one day in seven holy and set apart for worship*.

You might struggle with certain forms of authority in your life – maybe a boss, or husband, or coach, or teacher, even the government. And you're learning to submit, but you're determined to *always honor your father and your mother*.

You get upset and frustrated with people. Hey, dealing with people bugs you. But you're not going to *murder anyone – not even character assassination*.

You and your spouse argue a lot and struggle to see eye-to-eye, but you've decided in advance to honor your commitment, and stay true to your vows. It's a non-negotiable - you're *not going to commit adultery – in action or in thought*.

You don't make a lot of money. Legitimate needs are going unmet, but you've decided in advance to trust the Lord rather than *take what doesn't belong to you*.

You feel you've been treated unfairly – that you've gotten the short end of the stick - but lying to get your way is not an option.

Truth-telling is a non-negotiable.

You've worked hard to upgrade your house, keep your wife in a nice car, and buy your kids cool clothes – but you've decided not to compare yourself with what other people, at your station in life, might possess. You're done trying to keep up with the Joneses – it's not for you. *You won't covet your neighbor's situation.*

This is what the Ten Commandments are all about... God's Top Ten are the non-negotiables God knows we need. These are the issues that really matter.

The Ten are bedrock principles on which we can build our lives and families.

One night at dinner, a father pulled out his Bible and shared a devotion with his family. The passage he read included the Ten Commandments. When it was over he realized he'd gone a little too long, and lost the attention of his preschoolers. In an effort to pull them back in, he asked his 5 year old, "How many commandments did God give Moses?" Little Seth shook his head and answered, "Too many!"

Guys, man-made religion will major on the minors - and minor on the majors. It makes a big deal out of the minutia, and amplifies the trivial. Man-made religion makes obedience to God complicated and cumbersome. But that's not the obedience God desires from us. God has given us just ten real priorities.

I love 1 John 5:3. It could serve as commentary on the Ten Commandments... "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments."

Notice John doesn't say, this is *how you earn God's love*, or *keep yourself in God's love*. Rather, he says the commandments are an expression of God's love.

God knows how to maximize life. He knows what it takes to live it to the fullest. And because He wants the best for us He's given to

us Ten Commandments.

And John isn't through, in 1 John 5:3 he finishes his thought, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome." God has not given us a million "dos and don'ts" to weigh us down, and bum us out, and confirm our condemnation. He's given us just ten non-negotiables that will protect us, and bless us, and make our lives better.

Remember Exodus 31:18, we read it last week. It tells us, "When (God) had made an end of speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God."

Apparently, God wrote the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets – and, thus divided them into two categories. The *first tablet* – which consists of the first five commands – *defines man's relationship with God*. While the *second tablet* - or the last five commands - *outlines man's relationship with His fellow man*.

In Matthew 22:36 Jesus was asked by a Jewish scholar, what was the greatest commandment. Jesus gave him two... "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

In essence, Jesus was summarizing the two tablets Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. The first tablet teaches us to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind - while the second tablet teaches us to love our neighbor as our self.

Which reminds me of the day when Moses went to God, and asked Him, "Lord, we're a sick people. We need help. What medicine can you prescribe us?"

God, the Great Physician, handed Moses the Ten Commandments, and said, "Take these two tablets daily, and if you're not better soon, come back to see Me."

Guys, if you take these two tables daily you will be healthier, and

happier, and holier. The Ten Commandments are the medicine many of us desperately need.

And this morning we want to look at the very first commandment – *numero uno*.

At the top of God's Top Ten - God says to the Hebrews and to us - His people, both then and now, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me."

Guys understand the context in which this command was initially given...

The Hebrews had just departed from a land of idols. The ancient Egyptians deified nature, animals, even the pharaoh. They recognized 20,000 different gods.

And even the Hebrews had developed an attraction to many of them. Later, in Joshua 24:14 the next generation is commanded to "put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD!"

In the study of Exodus, often we overlook an important point - the ten plagues God brought on the Egyptians were actually an assault on Egyptian idolatry... Numbers 33:4 comments, "on their gods the LORD had executed judgments."

Turning the Nile to blood - the proliferation of frogs - swarms of flies - the death of the firstborn - even the diseased livestock were not plagues chosen at random.

Each plague targeted a different Egyptian deity... The Nile was considered sacred. The goddess Heqt was personified as a frog. "Beelzebub" or "Lord of the flies" was an ancient name for Satan. Is it any wonder the Egyptians worshipped flies? The pharaoh and his heir – his firstborn – were considered to be divine.

The Egyptians even worshipped bulls and heifers. *Holy cow*, what a mistake!

The ten plagues Charlton Heston brought on Yul Bryner and the Egyptians were designed by the one, true God to show His supremacy over their Top Ten idols. God dared the forces of evil to a showdown, and blew them all out of the water. With a shepherd's rod, God knocked off the gods of Egypt one by one.

And here's the nation standing before Him at Mount Sinai. It's been ninety days since the Exodus. They've been liberated. They have a fresh start – a new hope.

And with the ten plagues, and the parting of the Red Sea, these Hebrews have vivid demonstrations of the reality and supremacy of the true God burned in their memories... *Never again are they to worship anyone else.* God's words thunder from the mountain, "**I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me.**"

Fast forward 3500 years to modern times – a day when man has walked on the moon – when high-tech computers link the world in instant communication – when medical marvels have fought off disease and lengthened our lifespan.

You would think the human race might have outgrown its propensity for idolatry. No one would worship a stick of wood, or carved stone, or animal, or tree, or a star anymore. But that's not happened. All over the world idolatry still abounds.

Today, in the country of India, Hindus worship 300 million gods and goddesses. That's more than eight idols per household. There's enough beef in the country of India to feed the entire continent – but it can't be harvested because Hinduism teaches reincarnation. If you eat old Betsy you might be eating your grandma.

Monkeys and rats are also considered sacred. Thus rodents and scavengers are allowed to ravage crops. They're worshipped rather

than exterminated.

Also realize, there are Buddhists, the world over, who worship the chubby little image they sit on their mantle. Every year 100,000 people flock to Ceylon where they pay homage to Buddha's tooth. His eyetooth sits in a temple, and Buddhist worshippers lay before it their gifts of gold and silver and jewels.

Muslims worship Allah – who, despite what they might tell you, is not the God of the Jews and Christians. Allah is a false god. You can trace his worship to a time predating Muhammed. Allah was a local Arab deity. He was probably the moon-god – which explains why the symbol for Islam is the crescent moon.

There are disciples of Rome who bow before icons and statues of the Virgin. They direct their prayers to relics, and believe they hold supernatural powers.

New Age patrons in America worship “*mother earth*” and “*father sky*”. They pay homage to “*Gaia*”, goddess of nature – and “*Sophia*”, goddess of wisdom.

New Agers will wear their crystals - and sleep under pyramids – trusting inanimate objects to infuse them with spiritual life and energy and power.

And believe it or not, there's a group in Denver, Colorado known as “*The Church of the Risen Elvis*”. No kidding... They consider the singer a god.

They've enshrined an Elvis doll above an altar, adorned it with candles and flowers. They raise their hands in worship, and chant Elvis' name, and pray to the deceased star, and hold special services whenever an Elvis sighting occurs.

And imagine, they do all this for a guy who said himself... *he ain't nothing but a hound dog!* My point is that idolatry, even in modern

times, is still alive and well.

Yet, most of us are probably thinking, *this can't possibly apply to me?*

This is an issue a million miles from where I live. "I don't have an idol sitting on my mantle. There's no Buddha in my living room... I'm in no danger of idolatry."

Recently, a Barna Research Group poll revealed that 76% of all Americans believed they were being completely true to the first commandment. 81% of women and 69% of men felt they had no other gods before the true God.

But here is where we need to reconsider... Let's think again...

Just this past week, I ran across a few statements in the newspaper that used religious language in an unexpected way. It was applied to non-religious subjects.

On Monday, an article talked about a rock concert, and particularly the guitar playing of Eddie Van Halen, "In the end, it was all about Eddie, firmly middle-aged but still lean, keen and shirtless. He was in total control of what was a lovefest. This was Eddie's temple of rock, and the 8000-plus fans bowed to their savior."

A Tuesday article on the proliferation of cleaning products opened this way, "The stain-slaying product is all but worshipped at the altar of the front-loader."

And then on Wednesday, there was a report of Diana DeGarmo's visit to Wal-Mart. Of course, you know Diana as the star of, "American Idol" – and interesting name for a television show... But the article quoted a mother talking about her six year old daughter's obsession with Diana. The mother said, "She's been watching her and rooting her on... Diana has become her idol." *There's that word again.*

Please understand, I'm not suggesting Diana is trying to gain your worship – or seeking to be anyone's god – nor is Eddie Van Halen

(though I'm not so sure with Eddie) – nor are the manufacturers of oxy-clean - but the language is revealing... Even in modern culture we talk in terms of worship, and homage, and idols.

I do believe that idolatry is a bigger issue for all of us than we think. For you can make an idol out of anything – out of a person, or possession, or pleasure, or leisure activity, or position, or even a philosophy. Idolatry is a threat to us all.

DL Moody once said, “You don't have to go to heathen lands today to find false gods. America is full of them. Whatever you love more than God is your idol.”

Arthur Wallis put it this way, “An idol may be defined as any person or thing that has usurped in the heart the place of pre-eminence that belongs to the Lord.”

And Billy Graham stated, “Whatever you love most - be it sports, pleasure, business, or God – that is your god.” Idolatry is far more relevant than we think.

When Paul writes to Timothy he calls the one, true God, the Almighty - “the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy.” I like that... All the good stuff, the healthy and holy and happy stuff - the things and thrills that truly bless our lives – it all comes from God. And He takes joy in watching us enjoy!

Take for example football. I really enjoy sitting down in front of a football game and watching the strategy and action. It's a diversion from my normal routine that enables me to relax, and release, and recharge my batteries. I can bark, and sic'em, and cheer on the Dawgs – and when the game is over I feel better.

And I believe the Lord takes pleasure in me watching the Dawgs...

But can I take what is a legitimate pleasure – a football game – and turn it into something illegitimate - *even an idol*? Absolutely! I have met some Bulldog fans who've gone too far... Each week they live or die on the Dawgs. They pray to Vince Dooley. They're totally

consumed. A football team preoccupies their life.

Some men worship the football gods, and offer up the sacrifice of pigskin.

And lest I alienate all the men, and please only the women – it goes both ways.

Take shopping for example. Some of you ladies really enjoy browsing the mall. Shopping relaxes you and enables you to unwind. It provides you enjoyment. And is there anything wrong with shopping? *I wish I could say otherwise, but no!*

I really don't want to admit this... the men might hate me forever... but in the spirit of fairness, I've got to... When God sees ladies out shopping, and enjoying themselves, and fellowshipping with friends, He takes pleasure in their pleasure.

But, can shopping be abused? You betcha'. Bargain hunting, a shopping spree, the latest fashion, the blue light special, can all become an obsession - an idol.

Here's my point, when any legitimate relationship, or possession, or pleasure, or profession, or philosophy moves outside the boundaries God established for it – or when it grows in significance until it's more important than God – it's an idol.

Good things, legitimate relationships, noble causes, useful tools, God-given pleasure, unsought recognition, can turn into an idol if I take it out of proportion.

Here's the non-negotiable in my life. I deliberately try to guard my heart from any preoccupation that will take my focus off of God for any length of time. I want my heart and mind and time reserved for God. How can He truly be my God if I spend all my time and energy and money worshipping something else?

Guys, **possessions** can become an idol. What we call “toys” can be idols.

You say you don't have an idol, but check in the garage - or in

your golf bag - or on the gun rack - or in the jewelry box - or in the bank account. People wash and wax their idol every weekend. They wear it around their neck or wrist. It's stored in the attic, or sits in the den, or buzzes when it connects to the Internet.

Let me examine your checkbook, and your daytimer, and it won't take me long to figure out what you worship. What gets the majority of your money and time?

Don't make light of what I'm saying – God sure isn't... *Items* can turn into *idols*. Material things have the potential of grabbing my heart, and jerking it from Jesus.

It's okay to possess things, as long as those things don't possess you.

Possessions can become idols, but so can **people**.

Human relationships can take precedent over a person's relationship with God. A friend, or sweetheart, or spouse can become more important to you than God. Hey, I've even seen new parents drop off their little idols back in the nursery.

People can become an idol, but so can **popularity**.

Selfish ambition, the lust for fame, esteem in the eyes of others – is what drives some people. They feed off of other people's approval. They live for the cheers of the crowd. Even an association with someone else who is popular can be an idol.

And so can **position**, or **profession** – business success can become an idol.

Tom Peters wrote the business classic, "*In Search For Excellence*". It was a book used as a model for good business. But Peters was quoted recently...

He said, "The cost of excellence is the giving up of family vacations, Little League games, birthday dinners, gardening, reading, and most other pastimes. We have a number of friends whose marriages crumbled under the weight of their devotion to a

dream. We are frequently asked if it is possible to *'have it all'* – a fully satisfying personal life and a fully satisfying hard working one. Our answer is no.”

Jesus agrees. He told us a long time of ago, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." Make *profession* your god and you'll run the risk of losing everything else that really matters.

But the opposite can also happen. **Leisure** can become a god.

Some people make *work* their god - others *"live for the weekend"*. Their top ambition is to kick back and party. What movies can they see? What tickets can they get? What vacation can they afford? – Leisure becomes their goal and god.

Pleasure too can become an idol.

Sex, drugs, food, entertainment – football, soap operas, reality TV shows, even news coverage – can become idols. Ravi Zacharias defines a legitimate pleasure as *"anything that refreshes along the journey without distracting from the goal."*

A pleasure becomes an idol, when it proves to distract us from God.

I've heard idolatry defined as, *"making a mountain out of a molehill."*

For example, there's nothing wrong with a vacation - but it's the molehill, not the mountain. It should be a diversion, not the aim of my life. A trip to the ballpark - or a fun day at the beach is great – but don't let it be the end in itself. Let Jesus take charge of the trip. Let Him direct your steps. Enjoy the day with the Lord.

Pleasure can be an idol, and so can a **philosophy**.

How many folks have gotten caught up in an ideology, or a movement?

Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, *"Men are idolaters, and want*

something to look at and kiss and hug and throw themselves down before; they always did, they always will; and if you don't make it out of wood, you must make it out of words."

A good cause – like world peace, or save the earth, or save the whales – or even good grades - can become an idol. Even an *ideal* can become an *idol*.

And don't forget the most subtle idol – **pride** can create an idol out of me.

This was the jist of ancient idolatry. The gods men made were actually images of themselves. Of course, their strengths were exaggerated, and their weaknesses downplayed - but man has always made his gods in his own image and likeness.

And modern man has the *same tendency*, but with *more audacity*. He simply renounces the whole notion of a supreme being. He puts himself in the place of God. He claims to be the master of his own fate – captain of his own ship.

It reminds me of the arrogant man who called dial-a-prayer... *to see if he had any messages!* Some people think they're god. They like being their own authority.

Did you hear about the five year old little boy who prayed, "**Dear Lord, when I'm dead, can I be God?**" At least he was willing to wait until he was dead. I know 50 year-olds, and 35 year olds, and 25 year-olds who want to be their own god right now! At least that's how they live their lives. They make up their own rules - set their own course – rely on in their own wisdom. Their *idol* has become an "*I*".

Earlier in this morning's study, I quoted Joshua 24, where we're told that the Hebrews in Egypt worshipped the gods of the Egyptians. I'm amazed they were attracted to worship gods who enslaved them, and made their lives miserable.

But that's what happens when you worship an idol. Satan is

behind any idol.

He camouflages himself in the suit of another god – and it's only after you bow down, and pay homage, and develop an attraction and dependence on that god – that Satan rips away the veil and reveals his intent to trap you and destroy you.

It reminds me of the fly that landed on the flypaper. The fly boasted, “my flypaper” - while the flypaper said, “my fly”. When you worship another god, Satan lets you think you're in control – that you're using it for your enjoyment – then after a while you realize the idol to which you've bowed is really in control of you.

And by the time you've realized it Satan has sucked the life right out of you.

The one true God wants to better your life. The Bible says “no good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly.” Any other god will diminish you.

In a few weeks we'll be visiting the island of Hispaniola. There are two countries that occupy that island – Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Two hundred years ago the people of Haiti prayed to Satan that if he delivered them from French control they would devote their nation to him. The Dominican Republic is largely a Christian nation that has worshipped the one, true God.

Well, even a brief visit to the island of Hispaniola can teach you a lot about what God can do for a country, and what Satan will do for a country. Satan is the mortal enemy of mankind. His mission is always “to steal, kill, and destroy.” Go to Haiti and you'll find a nation dominated by voodoo - gripped by an unrelenting and brutal poverty – bogged down with corruption - a nation with no infrastructure to withstand the tropical storms that have recently devastated the people's lives.

This is what Satan and his enticements will do for your life.

Whereas, a visit to the Dominican paints a different picture – the

land is fertile, the forest lush, the country prosperous. It's the same island – but one side has been raped by Satan, while the other side has enjoyed the blessings of God.

Imagine in your mind, three million Hebrews gathered together at the foot of the holy mountain. They're standing before God. Thunder and lightning are overhead. The ground is rumbling under their feet. That's when God's voice booms out...

“You shall have no other gods before Me.”

When we hear those words, we think that God is concerned about being first on our list of priorities. That He's got a long printout, with a listing of all that should be important to us. God only wants to make sure that He's at the top of our list.

I read a sermon on the first commandment that communicated this idea. It was entitled, **“Put God First”** – but that's not what the first command actually means.

Remember, the physical, tangible presence of God has descended on Mount Sinai. The mountain is God's pulpit – the people are the congregation spread out before Him. When God says, **“You shall have no other gods before Me”** He means before Him, and beside Him, and behind Him, and all around Him. God is not just commanding to be made first on their list of gods – He wants to be their only God.

In the first commandment God wants to eliminate all other rivals in sight.

The Phillips paraphrase captures the idea, **“No other gods, only Me.”**

This first commandment excludes from our lives anything that competes with our affection for God, and our devotion to God. Again, God isn't saying we can't possess stuff, or have fun, or enjoy relationships – as long as it draws us to Him, and doesn't keep us from Him. God wants to be *the end-all* and *be-all* of our lives.

Here's the litmus test we need to apply... **Is the stuff in our lives a tool to draw us closer to God, or a distraction that gets between us and God?**

This past summer I took Kathy and the boys on vacation to New York City. I went on Hotels.com and got a good deal on a room right off of a Times Square.

And New York is impressive – the glitz and glamour – the flash and splash. I suppose New York City and Times Square embodies all this world has to offer.

But on our way home from New York I remembered a quote I read from a preacher named, *Bud Robinson*. After his first visit to the Big Apple, he prayed a prayer that expressed my heart, **“Lord, I thank You for letting me see all the sights of New York City. And I thank You, most of all, that I didn't see a thing I wanted.”**

Here is the first non-negotiable that I hope you lay in the concrete of your life...

Every day, make a conscious, deliberate effort to guard your heart and mind from anything that might distract you from God, or weaken your love for God.

Commandment number one instructs us not to allow anything else in our lives to be more important than God. Hear Him speak to you, **“No other gods, only Me.”**