

## Deuteronomy 5:6-10

6I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 7you shall have no other gods before me. 8You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 9You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, 10but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

The first two commandments declare the sovereignty of our God and the call for our absolute devotion. Most of us would say we put God first, but as Levon Hamilton reminds us, “We all struggle with our own false gods. And it seems that we tend to allow other things to creep in and usurp the place of God.” And quite often, they are good things, such as family, friends, work, and worship.

These two commandments don’t declare that there are no other gods; that is a later theological development, but they affirm that they are not our gods. Our God is the Lord, not Ra, an Egyptian deity, or Mammon, or Baal, or Beelzebub, or some other god. Our God is the Lord, the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all that is.

As the prologue to the decalogue, the ten commandments declare, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

This declaration not only declares what God has done for us but who God is. In Scripture, I AM is God’s name that appears often as another word, LORD, with capital letters in the Old Testament. That was done so that the sacredness of God’s name would be preserved, and we wouldn’t speak it accidentally. So while we are given God’s name, we use LORD to preserve its sacredness. When God shares the name Lord with us, a deeper relationship is established. The biblical act of giving a name to another symbolizes the right to call upon the one who gave the name. The relationship begins with God’s act of redemption and is followed by our response. And God shares with us that our expected response is to be the Ten Commandments.

Because of what God has done and by giving God’s name to us, there is to be a permanent relationship that God will keep as long as we adhere to the commandments. But as we know from our scripture, the people of Israel stray and stray again, and despite calamities such as defeat, captivity, and oppression, they never seem able to keep up their side of the bargain. And when we are honest, neither can we. And yet God, whose name might well be I AM LOVE, never gives up on them or us. God wants to be the center of our lives. But sometimes, we place other things there. Maybe not in our words, but our time and finances tell a different story.

In a list of gods we give our allegiance to, Adam Hamilton started with fitness. At first, I thought that was ridiculous, then I recalled all the hours I spent in the gym when I was a competitive powerlifter. Often, it was what kept me going on a bad day, and those hours I treasured even more than I would like to admit. It was a sacred part of my life. For some people, it is work, finances, or a sports obsession, Go Bills, for some, it is gambling, drugs, or alcohol. It can be any obsession, person, or thing. It might be healthy or harmful. But when it becomes the center of our lives and the source of our joy, there is danger.

When we put ourselves and our desires at the center of our lives, it means we have kicked God out or pushed God to the side. God might still be something good, but we don't want God to get in the way of what we want or think we need.

Even our church and our family can become obsessions, too, and I get it. I deeply love my family and my church, but I know that at times, even these extremely good things can and will let me down and disappoint me. It is God at the center of our lives that allows us to deeply love family and church, even when they disappoint us. God doesn't need to be at the center of our lives; God wants to be there. We are the ones who have that need for God at the center of our lives, and God knows that we were created for God to be there, and God will be there if we allow it.

When we place God and God's eternal love at the center of our lives, it makes room for all God's good gifts. It allows us to celebrate our family, our church, and all the blessings of life without being crushed or destroyed when they let us down.

We all know the sorrow-filled picture of the person who put their career first and gave all to the company, only to be told one day that they weren't needed anymore. Maybe it has happened to us or someone we love. Or if not this, some similarly crushing blow. Without the power of God's love, it is a crushing, often life-destroying blow. It doesn't mean these things won't hurt; they will. But with God's abiding love at the center of our lives, we can survive such blows and make it through the pain without our spirits being crushed.

The second commandment is, I think a reiteration of the first, and that is why some traditions treat both together as the first commandment.

The second commandment forbids making images of God. Many of us remember the story of the Golden Calf. Moses had gone to receive the commandments and commune with God. He was gone for a long time, and the people got scared and feared that he might never return. They convinced Aaron, Moses' second-in-command, to create an image of God for them to worship, and so the gold was collected, and the calf was built. Aaron declared, "Here is your god who set you free."

Why did they do this? They were scared. They were insecure. They felt lost, and as they gave up on Moses and, by extension, God. Without Moses, they couldn't see or trust God, so they made an image of God like they saw in Egypt. It wasn't enough for God to overthrow the Egyptian slave lords and set them free; they wanted more, and they liked it now, to ease their fears.

Just then, Moses came down the mountain. He was so furious at what they had done that he threw down the tablets of the law, the ten commandments, and shattered the commandments that God had personally written. Moses was expressing his own anger and rage at idolatry. He couldn't believe the people quickly reverted to the idolatry of Egypt and symbolically chose the captivity and idolatry of Egypt to freedom and faithfulness of the living God.

As always, even though the Bible is quite graphic on the consequences and destruction. It can't escape God's continuing giving of second chances, as Moses returns with the second set of the commandments, which were etched by Moses rather than written by God. So even with second chances, there can be a loss when we choose to depart from God's way. In their case, it was no longer direct communion with God.

If you read the OT closely, it is easy to see this was a constant temptation to seek security from other people's gods that were created of wood, stone, or precious metal. The prophets continually came to call them back to God for their own Good, for as they followed other gods, and gave them their primary allegiance, they ceased to live as a community of love, peace, and justice. They turned into a predatory society, taking advantage of the most vulnerable, who were of special concern to God. They rejected living as God commanded. They had rejected God's way.

Without being too hard on the Hebrew people and people of all ages, idols were an attempt to make the invisible gods visible and tangible, but no image could contain God. But God didn't leave them without reminders. The temple was prime where God would be present, and so was the ark, which represented the throne of God. But they were symbols, reminders of places of God's presence, not God's own self.

They are like church buildings; they are not God, but sacred spaces where God is present. God promises to be present in the church to enable us to receive divine love and instruction in living Godly lives. But what almost every minister can tell you is that the church, sometimes to some people, becomes more sacred than God. And it becomes more vital to protect the building than to be involved in Christ's ministry in the world.

Much like communion, bread and grape are reminders of the reality of God in Christ and what God has done for us, and we trust that God is present in the of bread and cup. They also point to the mystery of God's redeeming love and present an avenue for Christ to come to us. Christ is present there, but not identical to bread and grape. These are gifts of God for the people of God.

Sometimes it is more dire; a particular pastor, political writer, politician, celebrity, or pundit seems to be treated as infallible and, for all practical purposes, supplants God. Perhaps it is even something good, a special ministry, justice work, or peacemaking, that becomes all-consuming and replaces God as the object of our allegiance and faith.

The first two commandments seek to prevent this and safeguard us from following paths that will fail to yield the fullness of life God wants for us.

While we are not to create images, we also don't need them, for God has given us two images. The first image is Jesus. Want to know what God is like? God is like the picture of Jesus in the Gospels, one who came to bring us closer to God. For me, Jesus is the heart of my faith. He is the one who lets me know what I need to know about an awesome God who is beyond my comprehension. He is the one who declares from the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

And then, to guide us, we are reminded that we, too, are in the image of God, not to be worshiped like Jesus but to be loved and treated with respect. We are to love both ourselves and our neighbors. We are created by love and relationships. When we live that way, we can see God more clearly in each other. I found this statement by Shane Claiborne on the murder of Charlie Kirk. It catches what so many of us missed on our way to responding to the tragedy. It is what I reposted on my Facebook page.

\*\*\* Statement on the Murder of Charlie Kirk \*\*\*

By Shane Claiborne

My heart goes out to Charlie Kirk's family and all who loved him... especially his wife, Erika, and their two precious children. We must never rejoice in death. My faith teaches me not just to refuse to kill, but also to refuse to hate. And so this is a somber moment. Charlie Kirk was someone's child, someone's husband, someone's dad... and he is a child of God, made in the image of God.

The problem is in our tragically divided society and world filled with animosity and hatred; it is hard to remember that the other person is created in the image of God, even when they don't act like it, and the same is true for us. Sometimes we don't act like it.

We are all in the image of God. Remember that and as our confession says, God's loving mercy helps us grow more and more in God's likeness and image.

So God has forbidden us to have other gods and not make a likeness of God. God has given us the church as a reminder of God's guidance and abiding presence. God has come to us in Jesus so that we might be able to picture the essence of God, and God has given us each other to love and care for and see as folks created in the image of God.

And this, I think, is the best hope for our divided, violence-infected world. To remember that we are all in the image of God. That is not to say people don't violate that image; they do. But to use those fractures as an excuse for name-calling and generalizing people into groups as our opponents will only lead us further away from our God, who calls us to live in community.

Does that mean we cannot condemn evil acts? No, just the opposite, we must condemn them, but when we lump everyone who disagrees with us into the same group. Or if we start categorizing those with differences as disposable, or radical leftists or Nazis, we begin denying the image of God in each other, and that is deadly. For when we begin to declare who is not in the image of God and who is, we are busy in a workshop building idols rather than worshiping the god who created and liberated us and sent Jesus who lived, died, and was raised for us to remind us how precious each person is to God.

We may think, "What difference does our comment make?" A lot. It contributes to the divisiveness and explosive animosity in our society and community. The best analogy is like pouring gasoline on a fire, and if we do that, we too will get burned. Our spirits will be diminished. When we refuse to give in to hatred and us-them thinking we are a strong witness to Christ, a witness the world desperately needs. We testify to the community we were created to live in. To quote Jimmy Buffett and his song Calaloo, my license plate, by the way: "Though some may think that somehow they are not, make no mistake, we're all in the same pot." We were created to live together in love.

God wants us to keep our focus and absolute loyalty to God and treasure those other gifts of God's goodness we receive daily. In this way, our loyalty is not divided and every other claim on us is relative. As Jesus says, no one can serve two masters, and though he is talking about money, we could substitute any claim on our absolute allegiance.

These two commandments relativize all other claims on our allegiance, and remind us that nothing short of God, no matter how good, noble, and attractive can hold our faith and trust without letting us down. However, with faith in a loving, relational God, we can keep all other needs and claims on us in perspective and live a moral life pleasing to God.

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