

THEISM

“You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me”

The first of the Ten Commandments – “You shall have no gods before Me” (Exodus 20:3) is as relevant today as it was during Israel’s early national history. The fact that idolatry exists in our society cannot be denied, although admittedly it is now in different forms than then. Idolatry may be defined as “the religious worship of idols,” and as “excessive or blind adoration, reverence, devotion, etc” (*Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*).

During Old Testament times, idolatry was generally associated with images made of gold, silver, stone or wood that represented various gods. The gods of other nations that plagued ancient Israel were known by various names. The most common was the Canaanite male fertility god Ba’al and his female consort Asherah (1 Kings 18:19; 2 Kings 23:4). Among other frequently mentioned Canaanite gods that posed threats to Israel’s worship of the Lord were Dagon of the Philistines (Judges 16:23) and Ashtoreth goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh god of the Moabites, and Milcom god of the Ammonites (1 Kings 11:33; 2 Kings 23:13).

Israelite history has many instances of idolatry. Several are noteworthy. Aaron molded calves to be worshiped at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 32:1-6). Solomon permitted his wives to build temples to their idols (1 Kings 11:1-9). Jeroboam erected golden calves at Bethel and Dan (2 Kings 12:26-31; 2 Chronicles 13:8). Ahab’s wife, Jezebel, led the Northern Kingdom into idolatry (1 Kings 16:31; 18:4; 21:25). Manasseh, king of Judah, filled Jerusalem with idolatry (2 Chronicles 33:1-9).

Images are not themselves gods. They only represent gods. In addition to images, ideals or philosophies are associated with idolatry. Concepts about gods can exist either with or without images. Ideals and values, themselves, may even be characterized as idolatry. Thus, Paul referred to a covetous man as an idolater (Ephesians 5:5) and covetousness as idolatry (Colossians 3:5). Jesus taught that “you cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:24). In keeping with the definition given above, contemporary idolatry in the Western World is “excessive or blind adoration, reverence, devotion, etc.” to some philosophy or value. These forms of idolatry are primarily philosophical. Applying this understanding of idolatry, the First Commandment could rightly be stated as “You shall not adore, revere, or devote any value or philosophy before Me.”

While the first commandment is stated in a negative form (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7) it is also stated many times in positive ways. Moses wrote, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5). “Therefore you shall love the LORD your God, and keep His charge, His statutes, His judgments, and His commandments always” (Deuteronomy 11:1). Jesus also noted the commandment in a positive manner. “And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment” (Mark 12:30; see also Matthew 22:37; Luke 10:27).

Whether stated negatively or positively, the first commandment requires that God must be first in our lives. Whenever we put any aspect of creation before the Creator, we become idolatrous. People may worship various aspects of nature, history, money, humanity, or power instead of their Creator. These are the forms of idolatry in our world. Such idols may be more specifically identified to help us perceive the nature of idolatry all around us.

Idols of history include those of the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) and of the English naturalist Charles Darwin (1809-1882). While the Christian view of history is that God

created the world, operates within it, directs its affairs and will someday bring history to an end, Hegel and Darwin declared contrary views. Hegel gave a dialectical view of history, saying that every situation (thesis) has an opposite (antithesis) and that these two situations clash, and thereby produce a synthesis which becomes the next thesis, etc. This view of history became a foundational perspective for Marxism and Communism. This view of history removes God from originating, operating within or directing history. Darwin gave an evolutionary view of history that denies God's creative activity in originating all things, removes God from historical activity, and implies that the universe will exist forever. These idols are traceable to particular individuals and are easily recognizable. Other modern idols have not been so easily recognized.

Idols of humanity include such things as the philosophy of humanism, antinomianism, pragmatism, egalitarianism, and secularism. Humanism removes God from reality and makes humanity the supreme ruler over all human conduct. Antinomianism is the rejection of law. Because God's law is rejected, then all ethical considerations are founded only upon human thinking. Pragmatism is the belief that whatever works is best whether or not it is consistent with godliness. Humanistic egalitarianism requires that everyone have equal opportunity and material prosperity, not the Christian understanding that everyone has equality before the law. Secularism is the belief that life should be lived only in view of whatever is temporal and of this world. It therefore contends that religion should not enter into public affairs of the state, such as politics and education. These idols of humanity have legitimized abortion, divorce, pornography, gambling, homosexuality, and many other anti-Christian vices in our culture.

Idols of nature include beliefs that nature is all there is (denying the existence of the supernatural), that whatever can be known must be based upon reason (not revelation from God), and that nature (neither God nor humanity) determines human activity. Idols of power are generally always related to civil governments. They include beliefs that the state (not God) is the savior of its people, and that the state (not God) is guardian or father of its citizens. Idols of mammon, often associated with idols of power, include state regulation of inflation, and the state's right to redistribute wealth. Idols of religion take many forms, including what is often referred to as civil religion. Modern idolatry thus exists in many forms.

Israel's idolatry led to their destruction. "With their silver and gold they made idols for themselves to their own destruction" (Hosea 8:4, NIV). Their ruin came because they rejected God. Moses told Israel, "But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them . . . you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days in the land . . ." (Deuteronomy 30:17). Joshua gave the same warning, "If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you, after He has done you good" (Joshua 24:20). Other prophets declared the same. These warnings proved true. God eventually brought the kingdoms of Israel and Judah to ruin because of their idolatrous practices (2 Kings 17:6-41; 21:1-16; 23:26; 24:1-4; 2 Chronicles 34:24-25; 36:15-21).

Will it not be the same with us? Although people in our society once respected God, many have now given themselves over to idolatrous philosophies and practices. God seems no longer to be first in our culture. If this continues, can we hope for anything but the destruction of our nation also? Therefore, should not we who seek to serve God do whatever we can to destroy modern idolatries that are all around us? Should we not strive to build a culture wherein only the God of the Bible is served? To turn our nation back to God, we must attack and destroy these idols.