

## Commandments I: Other Gods

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Exodus 20:2-3

1 Kings 18:20-40

“You shall have no other god before me.” Short, sweet, to the point, easily understood; what more could we possibly want out of a commandment? Unlike some of the other commandments that we’ll get to in later weeks that have deeper meanings hidden within the words used, this commandment has no real depth beyond its face value, and I like that, whether in rules or people. Truth be told, the most complicated element about this commandment is the phrase “before me.” Often when we hear the word “before,” it’s in relation to time, like the phrase “Before I begin.” Here, though, it’s in reference to space, like the sentence “Bring him before me.” God, the speaker of the commandments, is saying that we should not glorify, praise, and “worship” anything that is within God’s sight, which, if we’ve paid attention in Sunday School, we know is everything. That’s all there really is to this commandment. Easy, right? We should be perfect at doing it, right?

Unfortunately, although this commandment is debatably the simplest of all, this is the commandment we probably break the most. There are many powers in our world that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, draw our attention, glorification, what have you away from God. A prime example of this would be money. Everyone knows the phrase “Money makes the world go ‘round.’” Over vacation, my father-in-law talked to me for the better part of two hours about why I need to invest the money in my IRA in the stock market, how best to invest in the stock market, which stocks to buy, and the like. I walked away from that discussion confident that, when I retire at 65 (if not older), I will have over \$1M in my IRA from which to draw and be able to support Katie and myself quite comfortably until God calls us home. Mind you, my father-in-law and I are very faithful people. We are both devout Christians. Neither of us has a hidden shrine to money in our closets. We don’t pray to the S&P 500 or NASDAQ. However, I knew that if wanted to plan for the future and to support Katie especially, I had best listen to every word he said. It’s hard to deny that money holds a great power over this world, one that draws attention away from God and all that God can and is doing. Money provides that immediate, desired result we want as opposed to the result God would give us at “the right time” and in God’s own way. We can pray for wealth, but we’ll be given wealth in relationships and experiences over a lifetime rather than a winning lottery ticket, what we really want in that moment. As I mentioned, though, money is just one of the other “gods” in our world. We have in the modern day many different gods that we hop back and forth between, much like the Israelites hopped back and forth between God and Baal based on what was most convenient in the moment. That “hopping between two opinions” is what leads up to today’s other reading.

Of all the stories of Elijah’s miracles, the reading from 1 Kings for today is probably my favorite because it has the most vivid description we receive of all his miracles. Here, Elijah has challenged King Ahab and the Israelites’ worship of the Canaanite god, Baal. King Ahab has even called Elijah a troublemaker among the Israelites. Thus, to prove how powerful the God of Israel is, he challenges 450 priests of Baal to a little contest. Both groups will prepare a bull for burnt sacrifice appropriately but not light it. Whichever bull gets consumed by heavenly fire proves the power and existence of that god. The 450 priests go first, and from morning to evening, they dance around and chant, but nothing happens. Elijah begins taunting them, insinuating that Baal is asleep, preoccupied, or just not there. In fact, one of his taunts, saying

Baal has “wandered away” has a modern-day equivalent in saying Baal is “off relieving himself.” Regardless, these taunts lead to the priests cutting themselves and chanting louder. Eventually, evening sets in and it’s become obvious they will receive no response. So, Elijah has his bull soaked in no less than twelve jugs of water. The wood, the stones, the ground around the altar, and the bull all are just sopping wet at this point. The trench that was dug around the altar has become a moat. Suffice it to say, no one could possibly hope to set anything on or around this altar on fire. For anything to burn would be no mistake or coincidence. Sure enough, Elijah prays just once, calling on God, and everything is consumed. The bull, the stones, the wood, the water around the altar, everything is reduced to ash and vaporized. Sure enough, those watching this contest fall on their hands and knees and worship God as the only God. Then again, who wouldn’t? God has just proven definitively He is all powerful, present everywhere, and all knowing.

So, if we have a commandment that tells us our God is the only God, and the Bible further proves this point, why do we as God’s children, as Christians even, have these “other gods?” I mentioned money earlier, but it’s not the only one. You could also look at the god-like influence celebrities of all shapes and sizes have on us common folk. You could even look at how highly we elevate our politicians, our candidates, the political party with which we affiliate ourselves, simply politics as a whole and argue that it has become a god of sorts. So, why do we elevate these things to god-like status? The answer: impatience, the same impatience the Israelites had. Why pray to a God who delivers rain when it’s in His plan when you can pray to Baal and get rain right then? Why pray to God for wealth and sustainability only to get rich in experiences and a healthy support system when you can buy a lottery ticket and make millions of dollars overnight? Why pray for an end to poverty that may not come for centuries when you can just support, vote for, and elevate a candidate that claims to have a bulletproof plan to end poverty? Our desire to have answers to our prayers the same way we buy things online has confused us into thinking our prayers are spiritual “buy now” buttons. The Bible tells us God can do anything whenever He wants, and only He knows when it would be best to solve starvation or poverty in the world. That said, is it not worth giving all glory to God, knowing that His will, His power, His knowledge supersedes our impatience?