


Counterfeit Gods

Exodus 20:3-4



 *God said, “I am the LORD your God... You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.” (Exod. 20:3-5a, NIV)*¹

God can rightly demand that people worship him alone because he is the one true God. He is the Creator. He is the Giver of life. All other “gods” are counterfeits (fakes, frauds) relative to God.


Definitions

- “god” – In the context of Exodus 20, “other gods” refers to the various gods worshiped in the surrounding cultures and nations. God’s people are to worship the LORD alone.² In application to us, “other gods” includes anything that receives our devotion, worship or service, while diverting us from the devotion, worship and service that only God deserves.
- “image” – In the context of Exodus 20, “image” (or “idol”) refers to objects or images that represent “other gods,” though it may also include objects or images used to represent God. In application to us, an “idol” includes anything that displaces the one true God from his rightful place in our lives. Thus the first and second commandments are similar.

Discussion Questions

1. Make a list of “other gods” and “idols” in our world today, and explain why they can be called “gods” or ‘idols.’³



 *Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters.⁴ Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money”⁵ (Matthew 6:24, NIV)*

¹ The next verse (v. 5) says God is ‘a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate [him].’ Some people view this as a negative picture of God. However, being ‘jealous’ is not necessarily negative. God is absolutely faithful to his people, and his jealousy is pure and righteous. The idea of God ‘punishing’ descendants is disturbing to some. But this should be balanced with Deuteronomy 24:16, which says, ‘Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin.’ Also see Ezekiel 18:4. The Bible teaches both individual responsibility and corporate solidarity and judgment (*Judges 7*). Corporate judgment may seem ‘unfair,’ especially to those with an individualistic mindset, but corporate solidarity works for our salvation too! (*Romans 5:12-19*) In any case, most of us understand that a group’s sinfulness results in negative consequences to the descendants of that group.

² ‘LORD’ (Yahweh) is God’s self-revealed name which signifies his special self-revelation to his covenant people Israel (*Exodus 3:13-17*). Like a husband expects his wife to be faithful to her one husband, God expects his people to be faithful to their one God. To worship other gods is like adultery. Of course, the Bible teaches that there is only one true God, but the worship of ‘other gods’ is real.

³ Remember that the things we call ‘idols’ are not necessarily bad in themselves, but they occupy a wrong place in our lives relative to God. How can we identify ‘other gods’ and ‘idols’? We can ask questions like, ‘What is most valuable to me? What do I hold to be most irreplaceable? What would I be lost without? What do I think about with most intensity in the long stretches of my thoughts? What is my incentive for living? What gives my work meaning and purpose?’ (Gladys and Gordon Depree, *A Blade of Grass* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967], 9.)

📖 “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.”⁶ (*Colossians 3:5, NIV*)

Many different things can become “idols” in our lives.⁷ These things are not necessarily bad in themselves, but they occupy a wrong place in our lives relative to God.

2. In what ways are “other gods” and “idols” inadequate in meeting our deep desires and needs? *Why* are they inadequate?

3. What are the dangers in serving “other gods” and “idols”?⁸



📖 “Therefore my dear friends, flee from idolatry.” (*1 Corinthians 10:14*)

📖 “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” (*1 John 5:21*)

4. What should we do to stop or avoid serving “other gods” and “idols”? What practical steps can we take?⁹

🔑 “Idols cannot simply be removed. They must be replaced.”¹⁰

📖 *Jesus was asked, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.’”* (*Matthew 22:36-38, NIV*)

Reflection/Application

- Take time to identify the “other gods” and “idols” in *your* life. Ask questions like those in footnote 3. Commit to put away your idols and give God the priority that only he deserves. Apply the answers to question 4 above. Read a book like *Counterfeit Gods* by Tim Keller.

⁴ Some may disagree with this statement, believing we *can* serve two masters. However, this is not like working for two employers. The ‘master’ in this context requires total allegiance. Jesus said, “For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and *serve him only*.’” (*Matthew 4:10, italics added*)

⁵ ‘love and hate’ – Semitic idiom expressing a strong preference of one person or thing over another; ‘money’ (Greek ‘mammon’) – refers to all material resources.

⁶ The word ‘greed’ (Gk. *pleonexia*) generally means ‘inappropriate desire for more.’ Greed (‘which is idolatry’) is usually connected with money or power (*Luke 12:15; 2 Peter 2:3*), but in this context it may include the desire for more and greater sexual experiences. Certainly, this is also an idol for many.

⁷ In addition to money, power, and sex, potential idols include career, status, position, control, influence, acclaim, achievement, competence or skill, success, approval, saving face, social standing, beauty, intelligence, romantic love, family, spouse, children, political or social cause, ideology, morality or virtue, etc. Of course, ‘idols’ include idols in the literal sense, including objects and images representing ancestral spirits, ‘saints,’ Mary, or even God. And ‘other gods’ certainly include the gods of other religions, and also misrepresentations of the God of the Bible. Tim Keller differentiates between ‘deep idols’ and ‘surface idols.’ Deep idols include such things as power, approval, comfort or control. Surface idols include such things as money, spouse or children through which our deep idols seek fulfillment (Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* [New York: Penguin Group, 2009], 64-65).

⁸ In the Old Testament, God repeatedly warned his people Israel that worshipping ‘other gods’ would result in his punishment instead of blessing (*Deuteronomy 11:13-21*). We must not follow their example (*1 Cor. 10:1-14*).

⁹ According to the Bible, if we are not Christians, we are serving ‘other gods.’ So the first step is to receive Christ as Lord and Savior. After we become Christians, we must still take steps to avoid serving ‘other gods’ and ‘idols.’

¹⁰ Keller, 155.