

## **You shall not make yourself any idol**

### **Second commandment, reading Exodus 20:1-6 and Colossians 3:1-5**

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How many people here tonight are tempted to bow down and worship a golden calf? (projected on the screen). Clearly, this is not so relevant in our day and age.

Let's look at the commandment in Exodus 20. I divided in two parts for the sake of argument:

*First part:* You shall have no idol in any form and you shall not bow down or worship.

*Second part:* Why? Because I am God, I am jealous and I will show my love to those who do as I say.

Obviously I am being sarcastic. But when I read this commandment again after a long time, my reaction was more or less that for the first part I felt, *"that is just for primitive people, surely I won't bow down before golden calves, you will never see me break this"*. For the second part: *"well, OK, that may have been the case in the OT, but surely Jesus is not jealous and surely he loves me in any case. So, I conclude this must be irrelevant"*. How many of you feel like this?

Let's did a bit deeper, and start by watching this clip:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPil9Br-5IE>

Contrary to the video, idols may not be about sports stars or big teams for most of you, but I had my period in that, I can certainly relate to them. But just asking the simple question: Why are stadia so often filled with masses, and churches so often empty? That makes me think.

As a modern European, I honestly do not know what it was drew people to these calves, or what makes people paint their faces like that. But I do have idols in my life, and I suspect so do you.

### **Idol worship in the Bible**

In fact, one way to look at the Bible is to see it as one big refutation of idolatry. It is literally full of reminders against idol worship. Not only physical idols one can bow down to, but things that occupy our hearts. More on this in a few moments.

A central metaphor in the OT, describing our relationship with God, is that of marital relations, and indeed Gary spoke of this last week and I am just refreshing your memory here. *"Israel is married to God but is unfaithful to her husband"*, this is a recurring picture in the OT (e.g. Jeremiah 3:20). The husband demands exclusive love and devotion, but does not receive it. The betrayed husband seeks revenge and a strong urge to win back his beloved wife. God is therefore a JEALOUS husband, as the commandment says. Hosea even clearly describes idolatry as prostitution. This notion of exclusivity, where only God has the right to our worship, is crucial here. Imagine in a marriage, one party had to tolerate the existence of many lovers. Not funny

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<sup>1</sup> This talk profited enormously from two books (apart from the Bible): J. John's "Ten", which is the official book for the series, as well as Tim Keller's "Counterfeit Gods".

## How to discover an idol?

What constitutes a god/idol in our day and age? They do not come declaring "I am a god, worship me", no, they are good things distorted. The key phrase in idolatry is "When I have X (could be it, him, her), all my problems will be over, my life will have meaning and I'll be valuable". Do you have anything (other than God) in your life that you say "should I lose this (him or her), my life is not worth living". Think about this for a second. This is complicated stuff, deep inside. We will have the opportunity to pray about this later.

I want to add one layer. Following Tim Keller, let me make a distinction between personal and cultural idols. Here are some examples:

- *Personal idols*: romantic love, financial security, health, fitness, physical beauty, admiration of others, success, power (over others)
- *Cultural idols*: economic prosperity, technological progress, in traditional societies: hard work, family, duty, moral virtue, in modern Western societies: individual freedom, self-discovery, fulfillment.

In contrast to God, idols are gods that do not demand our exclusive love. Let me give you an example: if sex is an idol for you and you think about it all day long, it does not ask you to give up the idol of greed or money (quite the opposite). They are complementary idols.

Luther said in the large catechism: "*whatever your heart clings to and relies upon, that is your God. Trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and idol*".

Idolatry is an issue of the heart. Declaring with your mind that "*certainly I am not dependent on anyone but God*" may be easy, but the test of the heart is much more difficult. In Ezekiel 14:3, God says about the elders of Israel that "*they have set up their idols in their hearts*". Paul in Romans 1:24 quotes the worst thing that can happen to us, which is when God "*gives us over to the desires of our hearts*". The beautiful programming of our hearts in the image of God has a serious bug, a software failure, introduced by sin.

*"In the Biblical view of things, the main problem in life is sin, and the only solution is faith in the redeeming work of God which we can have by his grace. The alternative is to identify something else as the root problem of the world and something else than God as the main remedy. That demonizes something that is not completely bad, and makes an idol out of something that cannot stand the test of absolute good"* (paraphrasing Tim Keller).

## Brief examples of potential idols

In history, there have been a number of failed attempts to identify something else than sin as the root problem, and something else as God as the remedy. Here are some examples.

**1) Human reason.** Our own human reason can become an idol, and indeed it is for many. The idea that sciences and technological progress can solve all ills in our lives, and ultimately will make sin and suffering disappear (ie redeem us), has been around for at least 200 years. Needless to say, this idol failed and will continue to fail. At the latest the world wars of the last century did most of the work of proving this idol wrong, although it keeps coming back in different shapes and sizes.

**2) Political system.** Take for example if your root problem analysis of the ultimate ill of society is the fact that there is inequality or that there is private ownership, and that common ownership and socialism is the remedy to all, you are lifting a social model to a position where it cannot deliver on the high expectations. A social model becomes a god. It will inevitably fail, since the ideology (cousin of *idolatry*) of communism will not only marginalize God but also be an unequal society in the end where the Nomenklatura rules. The same is true for the opposite: if your root problem analysis of all ills is that there is common

ownership of anything (and that this restricts your freedom), or that there is a state in the first place and that therefore private ownership of everything and free markets are the ultimate remedy, it will fail just as badly. The result will be anarchy, which is not the same as freedom. Political systems and models are necessary, but they belong clearly to the here and now.

**3) Moral virtue.** Our moral and religious righteousness can become an idol for us. If for example your root problem analysis is that "the decay of the family" as a cornerstone of a healthy community is the source of all ills, and consequently "the restoration of the family" is the remedy. Now don't get me wrong. I am convinced that we need more traditional family values in our Western culture and I do believe it is the cornerstone of a healthy community. But the family is no substitute for God! Apart from God, apart from the creation story of Genesis 1, apart from the image of covenantal love between God and His people that also Gary spoke about, the family and the covenant of marriage are worth nothing more than a simple social contract, which progress can replace at any time.

**4) Beauty.** Physical beauty is a wonderful God-given thing. But if I fall prey to the consumerist ideology and the marketing of the redeeming nature of perfect bodies, I will be on the wrong track. I will not have beauty, I will have Aphrodite, beauty deified, which was one of the Greek gods on display on the marketplace in Athens when Paul came in Acts 17. The next step Aphrodite is often anorexia, which is no god by any standard, but a horrible disease.

**5) Love.** Even our most beloved ones can turn into idols for us: husband, wife or child. You can have children for all the wrong egoistic reasons: e.g to see them succeed in society the way you never did. People like this exist, drilling their children through school, music classes etc. Mostly it is not about "loving your children too much", but about "loving God too little in relation to your children".

Also our quest for romantic love can become a form of slavery. Some people may be saying: *if only I could get married*, everything will be ok, all problems solved. I did this for a long time, and had a deep longing for someone I could love forever. I went through love idolatry, occupying all my thought and mind with this other person (before coming to Brussels). Time passed, God worked in me, and by the grace of God, after some years Sara came. Somewhere in the beginning of our journey. Sara told me that I was not number 1 in her life, God was. I was number 2. Now when you hear this: *"you are number 2 in my life"*, initially it hurts a bit. It does not sound wonderful to hear something like *"you are the second best thing in my life"*. But I was ready to take the message, I knew what she was talking about. I came as close number 2, and so it is mutually today.

**6) Success.** I have to admit success and admiration of others have been idols of mine. I love it when I know something that only 3-4 others in the world know. For example, I get the kicks out of getting an SMS from a Commissioner I know well personally. I show it to others pretending I'm an insider. I don't mean to tell them they are outsiders but I'm sure so it feels. *My heart has a fixation to do some great thing and be admired for it.*

In this context, when reading Tim Keller's book "Counterfeit Gods", one story touched me personally, that of Naaman in 2 Kings 5:1-14, and I want to "retell" it here. Naaman was a powerful commander of the Aramese army, today's Syria. He was the equivalent of a general and prime minister in one. But he had leprosy, he was a dead man walking. Naaman was a successful leader, but he was on his way to becoming an outsider. Imagine today: *David Cameron with mortal cancer and he is convinced that he can use his power to save himself.*

A slave girl from Israel tells him about a prophet in Samaria, Elisha, who could cure him. Naaman puts in place all the usual channels, letters from the king to the king, money etc. He expects to buy himself salvation. His success had become a drug, and his fear of becoming an outsider drove his doing. This is how the story continues in verses 9-14:

<sup>9</sup> So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. <sup>10</sup> Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." <sup>11</sup> But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. <sup>12</sup> Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage. <sup>13</sup> Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed!'" <sup>14</sup> So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

Naaman tried to do what he could to help himself, if need be, pay a bit of money. In exchange Naaman expected God to do some powerful blessing where the earth would tremble. But he had to accept salvation coming through a servant girl and a weirdly behaving prophet (Elisha). God sent his salvation through the weakest of all. It took Naaman a while to accept this radical mercy. He got a simplistic, almost condescending command, to "just wash". You see, religion, Naaman thought, worked like a ladder you could climb up to God and on which he, Naaman, was already very high. He had been successful; surely he could buy also the favour of the God of Israel. But the result was disappointment. It was not about what Naaman had achieved at all. Today for you and me it still isn't. And everytime we trust our idols, there is cosmic disappointment. Real salvation is pure mercy. I have also caught myself saying "God, look at what I've done. Look at all I've suffered, surely it is my turn to be awarded now". We want God to affirm us in our doing. But God wants us to "lay our deadly doing down", and "Just wash", as he told Naaman.

### Finally: Replacing Idols

Here is a test for you, see if you can relate:

- God gives purpose, meaning and fulfillment to my life
- God governs the way I act
- God is the focal point around which my existence hangs
- God is often in my thoughts
- Thoughts of God comfort me when I am down
- I talk about God, I make friends with those who are also committed to God
- I desire more of God

Now replace the word God with: Financial security, the man/woman of my dreams, beauty, my career, my children etc, whatever is on your heart as a potential idol. We cannot simply remove an idol. The key is to *replace* the idol back to God.

Idolatry is not simply a failure to obey to commandments – it is a failure to *set* the heart to the right frequency, to God's frequency. (Colossians) The second commandment is directly and immanently linked to the first commandment Gary spoke about last week, you shall have no other gods. Indeed, the link is so strong that the Catholic or Lutheran churches even include this second commandment in the first one.

If at this point of you are thinking – if just about anything can be idolatry, how can I ever escape, never mind abstract messages of the frequencies of the heart. You are right, rejecting idolatry and *resetting* our own hearts can be too big for us to master – it may involve an effort of faith that we may not have, or we may lack strength or courage.

Remember this: God's salvation does not come in response to a changed life. A changed life comes in response to the salvation, offered as a free gift. Do nothing but receive it in repentance and thankfulness! We all have to learn like Naaman to "just wash". Amen.