

**January 17, 2010**  
**First Things First ... Not Second Best (Idols)**  
**Deuteronomy 5:8-10**

In a typical wedding I ask the bride and groom questions like this: *"Will you have this woman/man to be your wedded wife/husband, to live together according to God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love her/him, comfort her/him, honour and keep her/him, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep only unto her/him, so long as you both shall live?"* The answer is *"I will!"* Then the couple give their vows: *"I take you to be my wedded wife/husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I give you my troth"*

We go into marriage with the promise and assumption of permanence and loyalty to our spouse. And we expect permanence and loyalty from our partner! In the context of the covenant of marriage, it is a perfectly proper to be concerned about unfaithfulness or concern about being replaced by a rival: A bride says to her partner, *"Place me like a seal over your heart, or like a seal on your arm. For love is as strong as death, and its jealousy is as enduring as the grave. Love flashes like fire, the brightest kind of flame. Many waters cannot quench love; neither can rivers drown it"* (Song of Songs 8:6-7). Being "jealous" in this context is not envy; it is "a passionate concern for loyalty and faithfulness"! What would we think of a wife who was not concerned about whether or not her husband is faithful to her? What would we think of a husband who is not jealous of his wife's love and who would not burn with jealousy if she sought the love of another man?

*The real truth is ... God loves us*

In the same way, God says, *"I am a jealous God"* (Deuteronomy 5:9). That is a good thing! It means that God takes His promise of love for His people so seriously, that He does not want His people wandering off after other gods! In the first commandment He says, *"Have no other gods before me."* In the second commandment, He says, *"Ok, you have no other Gods. Know this: I love you so much, and I want you to love only me! I will be jealous if you love anyone but me!"* That is good news! God loves us so much! At the end of this passage, God says, *"I shower my love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments"* (Deuteronomy 5:10). God does love us! He wants the best for us! *"God is love. God showed how much he loved us by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins."* (1 John 4:7-10)

This second command is all about love! It's about God's covenant love for us - a love that saved the Israelites from four hundred years of slavery! The covenant love that has saved us from the burden of sin and offers us complete forgiveness, freely by His grace! The greatest love of all is a love that will lay down its own life for another ... that is the sort of love God showed us.

He gave us His Son - His own life - out of love! God promises, *to have and to hold you from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, for all eternity; and thereto He has given His troth (solemn promise).*

God wants us to love Him, and only Him!

What would we think if God were not jealous? What would we think if He were not concerned about whether or not we are faithful to Him? What would we think if God were not jealous of our love and did not burn with jealousy if we chase after another "number one" in our lives? (See last week's sermon)

*The real danger is ... settling for too little*

Therefore, God says, "*You shall not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to worship them ...*" (Deuteronomy 5:8-9). On the surface, this looks like God saying, "*Don't make a statue of a bird, or cow, or fish and worship it!*" Through the ages, people have used this command to prohibit religious art. Many Protestants (including Baptist, alas!) have been negative toward any form of religious art (except for a few paintings of Jesus). There is some merit in this. Sometimes people do venerated statues of saints, special medallions, or other talismans as "good luck charms." Art can become the object of worship itself. The Israelites, for instance, gathered all their wealth, melted it down, made a golden calf, and worshipped it, not God.

But this commandment is ***NOT*** really about art! God is a creative, artistic genius Himself! Look at the world around us! God commands His people to make beautiful art works (complete with statues of cherubim!). Art can help us worship God better, as we are moved to think about His creation, His actions, His majesty and power, and His love in new ways. Visual art - like music - is a gift of God that can help us worship God. The statue of the golden calf was not the problem: if the Israelites used it as a tool to help them worship God, all would have been well. If their worship moved past the calf to celebrate the creator of all blessing, things would have been fine. The problem was that their worship stopped at the calf, rather than the Creator ...

If art - music, visual art, drama - becomes an end in itself, it is an idol. (The same is true of money, recreation, work, and many other things - if they become ends in themselves, they become idols ... if they are tools to help us worship and serve God, then wonderful!)

We need to remember that this is fundamentally a command about love! This is a command about our hearts. Idolatry is about an exchange that we can make in our hearts. It happens when we exchange something - anything - that isn't God to replace God Himself. It happens when we allow God to be pushed out of the centre of our lives and allow something else to be the most important factor in shaping our lives. We can put all sorts of things in God's place ...

- Our career can become what dominates every choice we make;
- Money, our portfolio, or our retirement income can shape every decision;
- What others think of us - our dress, haircut, accessories - may be most important;

- Hockey, golf, bridge, poker, curling, vacationing can be number one ...

The danger is that we can substitute an image of God (an idol), for the real thing! When we do that, we cease to love God Himself, and we come to worship something less than God! It can be very subtle ...

*A man works in an office tower downtown. Once in a while he sees a woman getting on or off the elevator. Sometimes he sees her in the coffee shop around the corner. Week after week, month after month he notices her. He may have caught her name. But he never speaks to her. He never spends time with her. He imagines all sorts of things about her. In his heart he begins to think he loves her! Certainly he'd be jealous if he saw her with another man. If anyone were to say anything bad about her, he would be indignant. He creates an "image" of who he thinks she is. But it is only an image. It's not really her. If he were to actually speak with her, what might happen? He may discover she is far less glamorous than he supposes. Or, he may discover she is far more amazing than he ever could have dreamed! How his life could change, if he'd only made the effort to know her ...*

That's what we often do with God! We have a "picture in our minds" of who we think God is - it's probably not a statue carved out of wood or metal. That's not the point! The point is we have an "image" of God in our minds. And we think that's good enough for us. We don't spend time getting to know God Himself, personally! We watch Him from a safe distance. We have a vague emotional attachment to Him. We say we believe.

But do we really know Him? Do we spend time praying with Him? Do we spend time reading His word? Do we hunger to learn more about Him? Do we want to have a passionate, personal relationship with Him? Do we want to live in a way that pleases Him? Do we get annoyed at all those small distractions that lead crowd out God. Last week I cited Philip Yancey: "*I confess that some days I meet people, work, make decisions, talk on the phone, all without giving God a single thought.*" Does it upset us when we cannot find time to spend with the one we love?

It should! If it doesn't, we may have fallen into the most insidious form of idolatry - believing in a God who is out there somewhere - who doesn't seem to care if we love Him or not - who is "safe" - but who is also powerless.

Possibly we see inklings of Him on Sunday mornings - it makes us feel good. We're pleased when we hear other people talking about the difference God makes in their lives. We're offended when we hear a televangelist's pleas for money or moral failure, or when someone misuses God's name. But that's it. God is distant. He is a belief, but not an experience. He's an idol.

***The real invitation is ... to discover the true God!***

God wants something so much more! The vision God gives us in the very beginning of Scripture - His perfect vision for what our lives should be like - is of Him walking in the Garden of Eden in a personal, perfect relationship with Adam and Eve. God's vision for us as His people is to walk,

day-by-day, moment-by-moment with Him. It's about building a personal relationship with us that's exciting, real, dynamic, life-changing ...

When we accept Jesus as our Saviour, by faith, God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, becomes alive in us. *"God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us. All who proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God have God living in them, and they live in God. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect"* (1 John 4:13-17). That's God's promise.

Do you remember how you were changed when you fell in love for the first time (even if it was only a crush)? He/she occupied your thoughts. What did you do? You changed! You started hanging around where that person was. You suddenly developed an interest in the things that he/she was interested in. You wanted to be around that person all the time. You dreamed about him/her. You wanted to please her/him. You did all sorts of things to make that happen!

*"God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world ..."* In response, why wouldn't I want to really get to know God? Why wouldn't I want to spend time with Him? Why wouldn't I want to develop an interest in the things that God is interested in? Why wouldn't I want to please Him and do the sorts of things that honour Him?

- **Pray** - ask God for a real, personal experience of His love. That may mean confessing sin in your life that is preventing that from happening. It will probably mean reordering your priorities.
- **Spend time** - read the Bible, eager to know more! Pray constantly, without ceasing.
- **Get excited!** - listen to music! Read books! Spend time with God's people. Think about all that God has done and is doing for you and in the world! Talk about that with other people - Christians and non-Christians.

God is a jealous God! He eagerly desires your love! Don't settle for anything less than the real thing! Discover the power of God in a life-changing way! *Love God with a love as strong as death, with a love that flashes like fire. Many waters cannot quench that love; neither can rivers drown it. "I take you to be my God, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, even death will not tear us apart, but finally bring me into your perfect presence! Thereto I give you my troth." God, help us to love You in humility, in awe, in Spirit, and in truth!*

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