

JEALOUSY IN HIGH PLACES

Scriptures: Exodus 20:1-6; Matthew 6:24-33

I once heard a story of an atheist who was reading a list of the Ten Commandments on a courthouse wall, back in the days when such things were allowed. After reading the list the atheist said, "Well, at least I haven't broken the first one."

"You shall have no other gods before me." I don't think atheists are what God had in mind here. The first commandment is not addressed to atheists. In fact it seems to assume that there are no atheists. It assumes that everyone has a god. The only question is which one.

That same assumption underlies the scripture we read from Joshua 24 in our Litany of Confession. Joshua says to the people,

Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

For Joshua atheism is not an option. If you are not willing to worship the Lord, then you must choose whom you will worship, because everyone has a god whether they realize it or not.

Martin Luther once said that a god is whatever you believe in and trust with your whole heart. It is whatever you choose as the top priority of your life. By that definition everyone has a god, even atheists. Everyone has something or someone that defines their values and shapes their sense of purpose, that gives their lives direction and meaning. The question is not whether you believe in a god. The question is which god do you believe in?

The things people treat as gods are seldom trivial or bad. That was certainly true in the ancient world. Ancient people were not stupid. They worshiped things that mattered deeply to their lives, things like the sun, the earth, and the rain. People today worship things like health, wealth, family, career, and education. These are not bad things; they are good things. They only become bad when they become gods.

When I was a pastor in Potlatch, Idaho, I got to know a businessman named Dave. Dave started out farming and logging on land that he had inherited from his father. Unfortunately, about the time he got married, the bottom dropped out of the lumber and grain markets. Dave realized that he would not be able to support his family on logging or farming. So he started a Christmas tree operation. It was hard at first. Land put into Christmas trees will not produce income for at least ten years. Meanwhile that land can not be used to raise wheat or lentils. So they had some lean years before they saw any profits. And when profits finally came, they were often put back into more land and equipment.

About this time Dave and his wife lost a child that had been born three months premature. I went to see them, and Dave seemed appreciative that I came. He said to me, "I

know I should go to church more often.” Actually he never went to church, but that is what people usually tell me when they never go to church. They say, “I should go to church more often.”

But it wasn't just church that Dave missed. He was also away from home most of the time, buying or renting land for Christmas trees and making deals to supply Christmas tree lots all over the northwest. “I should probably be home more often,” he said, “but I've got to keep working or we won't have anything to live on. Someday the business will be established, then I can take some time off.”

Over the next few years Dave's business began to grow dramatically. One of his biggest accounts was in Texas, where I guess they don't have many Christmas tree farms. He had trucks shipping trees all over the country.

About this time their second child was born. They called me about having him baptized. Dave's wife had joined our church and attended regularly, but Dave still never came. “I just don't have time,” he explained. “Why some weeks I hardly get home to see my family.” Dave's wife nodded, but she did not say anything.

A few years later they had another child. I saw them at the hospital. Dave had barely made it back in time from a business trip. He had just finished a big project in Alaska and was leaving in a couple of days for Colorado. To make up for being gone so much, he bought his wife a new car.

The last time I saw Dave, shortly before I left Potlatch, he was one of the biggest employers in the area. He sold Christmas trees and nursery materials all over the country. His business was an unbelievable success, but his wife and two sons had left him a year earlier, tired of waiting for him to come home.

Do you see what can happen when something good, like a business, a career, a way of making a living, becomes the most important thing in your life—when it becomes your god? When that happens it destroys the things in your life that really are important—the things that will have lasting significance when you come to the end of your life.

The Bible tells us that the Lord is a jealous God. I sometimes wonder if Dave's wife might have helped him if she had been more jealous. She tended to be a quiet and fairly passive person. I know it bothered her that Dave's business consumed all his attention, that in effect his business was his mistress. But she rarely said anything about it. I wonder what would have happened if she had confronted Dave more dramatically, if she had got in his face and demanded that he make a choice: either his family was going to come first or his business, but he couldn't have it both ways. If she had been more jealous, more confrontive, I wonder if she might have saved Dave from losing the most important relationship he had.

Maybe it is a good thing that the Lord is a jealous God, a God who cares enough to get angry.

I had never appreciated what it meant to call God jealous until I heard a speaker at Whitworth College several years ago, a Christian professor from Japan named Kosuke Koyama. He told us that in eastern religions, the ideal image of God was an image of peace and tranquility, like Buddha sitting cross-legged quietly meditating under a tree. What a contrast that is, he said, to the God of the Bible. The Bible shows us a God who fumes at people, who yells and rants and throws things, all in a desperate effort to bring people back before they destroy themselves. The God of the Bible rages at the Israelites like a jilted lover, pleading with them not to sell themselves to a mistress and lose the most important and lasting relationship they could have. Kosuke Koyama gave us a wonderful description of what it means to believe in a jealous God. A jealous God, he said, is a God who confronts and embraces. In other words, it is a God who cares, who is not afraid to get in our face precisely because he loves us and wants to save us from throwing away our lives.

Everyone has a god. Everyone has something or someone to whom they have committed their life—something or someone whom you consider more important than anyone else. So here is the question: Is that something in your life eternal? Will that something or someone be there when everything and everyone else is gone? Will that someone still be there with you when your children are grown, when your business has closed, when your job has been phased out, when your house is sold, when your body has been laid in the ground or reduced to ashes? Is the most important relationship in your life also the one that is most lasting?

That is the question posed to us by the first commandment. As Jesus points out in our first scripture lesson, you cannot serve two masters. You cannot have two gods. If you give your life to something less than the one true God, it will let you down and you will lose God in the process, just like Dave lost his family. But if you seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, you will have the most lasting relationship you can ever have, and all the other relationships in your life will find their proper place.

- Ken Onstot
September 9, 2007