

“Disordered Love”
Sermon Series on the Ten Commandments #2
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First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC
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(Ex. 20:3; Lk. 6:46-49)

Introduction.

John Blanchard stood up from the bench, and, straightening his Army uniform, he studied the crowd of people making their way through Grand Central Station. He was looking for a girl whose heart he knew, but whose face he had never seen before – the girl with the rose. His interest began 13 months before in a Florida library. Taking a book off the shelf he found himself intrigued, not with the words of the book, but with the notes penciled in the margin. The soft handwriting reflected a thoughtful soul and an insightful mind. In the front of the book, he discovered the previous owner’s name, Miss Hollis Maynell.

With time and effort, he located her address. She lived in New York City. He wrote her a letter introducing himself, and he invited her to correspond. The next day he was shipped overseas for service in World War II, and during the next 13 months the two of them grew to know each other through the mail. Each letter was a seed on a fertile heart, and a romance began to bud. Blanchard asked her for a photograph, but she refused. She wrote that if he really cared, it wouldn’t matter what she looked like.

When the day finally came for him to return from Europe, they scheduled their first meeting – 7 pm in Grand Central Station. She wrote, “You’ll recognize me by the red rose I’ll be wearing on my lapel.” So, at 7 o’clock sharp he was in the station looking for the girl whose heart he loved but whose face he had never seen before.

The train arrived and people began to file out. A woman in a green suit walked toward him, and somehow he believed it had to be Hollis. She was so beautiful! As she approached, Blanchard started toward her and completely forgot to notice that she wasn’t wearing a rose. “Going my way, sailor?” she asked, even though he was wearing an Army uniform. Almost uncontrollably, he took one step closer, and then he saw the next woman coming down the platform behind her who was wearing a red rose. She was much older than him, and she was very plain looking.

As the young woman in the green suit walked away, Blanchard was divided in his spirit. He felt the desire to follow the pretty woman, but he also had a deep longing for the person whose spirit had accompanied him through such a difficult year when he was overseas at war. However, Blanchard didn’t hesitate. He

straightened up, and his fingers gripped the small worn copy of the book that was to identify him to her. And he said, “I’m Lt. John Blanchard, and you must be Hollis Maynell. I’m so glad to meet you. May I take you to dinner?”

The woman smiled and said, “I don’t know what this is all about, but the young lady in the green suit who just went by you asked me to wear this red rose on my coat. And she said if you were to ask me to dinner I should tell you that she’s waiting for you in the big restaurant across the street. She said it was some kind of a test.”¹

A kind of a test, she said. The first commandment is kind of like that. It’s a test to see if we will keep our priorities straight and our loves in order. And it starts with our love for God. As we consider the first of the Ten Commandments, I want you to consider: 1) the Context of the First Commandment; 2) the Meaning of the First Commandment; 3) the Challenge of the First Commandment; and 4) the Joy and Freedom of the First Commandment.

I. The Context of the First Commandment.

If you study the historical context in which the Ten Commandments were given to the people of Israel, you’ll discover that God was right to be concerned that His people would be tempted to seek the safety and protection of other false gods. The Israelites had just come out of Egypt where they had lived for 400 years in one of the most polytheistic cultures in the history of the world. Polytheism is the worship of many gods, and in this the Egyptians were unsurpassed.

They worshipped the gods of fields and rivers, light and darkness, the sun and moon, the sea and storms. They swore their allegiance to the gods and goddesses of love and war, and they bowed down to worship idols – statues, made in the form of people and animals. After their many years of captivity in Egypt, the people of Israel had a tendency to worship these gods too. It was a part of the culture they had grown up in. So God told them plainly, “*Put away the detestable things that your eyes feast upon, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am the Lord your God*” (Ez. 20:7).

In addition, the people who lived in the land into which the Israelites were going also worshipped many gods. The Promised Land was populated by the Canaanites, and they were notorious for their worship of a number of deities in a four-tiered hierarchy. The most prominent of their gods were Baal, the god of storms, Asherah, a fertility goddess, Mammon, the god of prosperity, and Molech, a god who was associated with child sacrifice. The Canaanites would actually sacrifice their children to Molech in an effort to win his favor or appease his anger.

In contrast to all this, the Lord told the people of Israel, “*You shall have no other gods before Me.*” This command was without precedent. No other nation in the ancient world prohibited the worship of other gods, and they assumed that

every nation would serve its own deities. But on this issue the God of Israel was completely intolerant. He refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of any other god. Israel was to be a monotheistic nation, and it would be the first of its kind. God wanted them to be an alternative society that would be a light to the nations, and it began with the worship of the one true God.

II. The Meaning of the First Commandment.

Why was God so insistent that the people of Israel worship only Him? Why was He so exclusive in His claims? Was God being egotistical or petty in demanding this? Not at all. Let me explain.

In his commentary on Exodus, Philip Ryken writes² that one of the first things parents try to teach their children is how to share. Moms and dads are forever reminding their kids to share their space, their toys, and their food. However, as important as it is to share, Ryken says that it's also important to realize that some things aren't meant to be shared. For example, a unicycle. Or confidential information shared with you by a friend. Or answers to a test. Or, on a more serious level, the sexual intimacy between a husband and a wife. These are things that were never intended to be shared with someone else. In order to use them properly, they have to be kept exclusive.

Ryken says that if some things were never meant to be shared, then it's not surprising to learn that there are times when even God refuses to share. He's a loving and merciful God who desires to pour out His grace and love on all people, but there are some things He will not share. For example, He will not share His glory with any other god. So He commanded the people of Israel, "*You shall have no other gods before Me*" (Ex. 20:3).

God won't share the stage with any other performers, and He refuses to have any colleagues. He will not even acknowledge that He has any genuine rivals. God doesn't simply lay claim to one part of our lives and worship; He asks for everything we have and all that we are. He wants our hearts, and He wants our love. And whenever we get our loves disordered and make other people or other things more important to us than God is, we're going to have problems in life. Unless we keep our love for God first and foremost in our hearts, we'll never discover the fullness of life that God offers.

Martin Luther understood this better than just about anyone else. In his *Treatise on Good Works* he wrote that the Ten Commandments begin with one against idolatry. Why does this come first? Luther argued that it was because the fundamental motivation behind breaking any of God's law is always idolatry. We never break the other commandments without first breaking this one. For example, the reason we lie to someone is because either we want their approval, or we want to gain a financial advantage, or we desire power more than we want to trust God

and keep Him number one in our lives. Otherwise we'd be more eager and willing to tell the truth and keep our word to our own disadvantage.

III. The Challenge of the First Commandment.

What exactly is idolatry? It is worshipping an idol. And what is an idol? It's easy for us to think that idols are little statues of antiquity that people made out of fear and ignorance, but idolatry is actually much more complex than that. An idol is anything or anyone that is more important to you than God is. It's anything or anyone that absorbs your heart or your imagination more than God does, and it's anything or anyone you seek to give you what only God can give. So, you see, an idol isn't just a little figure of an animal or a person that people bowed down to in Egypt or in the land of Canaan. An idol is anything that competes with God for our devotion and the first place in our hearts.

The problem we have as human beings is that we have an incredible tendency to make idols of people and things. John Calvin once said that the human heart is an idol factory, and he was right. We just keep cranking them out, even when we're trying to follow God. There are personal idols, such as romantic love and family, or money, power, and achievement. Maybe being accepted by the right circle of friends is very important to you, or perhaps it's your health, or fitness, or physical beauty. Many people look to these things to give them hope, security, or fulfillment, but only God can provide that.

In his excellent book *Counterfeit Gods*, following the lead of Calvin, Tim Keller writes, "The human heart is an idol factory that takes good things like a successful career, material possessions, love, and even family, and turns them into ultimate things. Our hearts deify them as the center of our lives, because we think they can give us significance and security, safety and fulfillment, if we attain them."

In one of his sermons Keller tells the story of two women he once counseled early in his ministry when he served a church in Virginia, and he said both women had teenage sons who were getting into trouble, and both of them struggled to forgive their husbands for how they were contributing to the problems in their family. The women asked Tim what they should do, and he told them they needed to forgive their husbands. One woman, who frankly had the worse husband, was able to do it, and she began to seek healing for her family's relationships. But the other woman, who by all appearances was a stronger Christian and actually had the better husband, just couldn't do it. And the reason was because her wayward son was the most important thing in her life, and she couldn't forgive her husband for the ways he contributed to the conflict in their family. The woman's son had become an idol to her.

IV. The Joy and Freedom of the First Commandment.

In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about his observations regarding America at that time, and he noted a “strange melancholy that haunts the inhabitants [in the United States]...in the midst of abundance.”³ He said that Americans believed that prosperity would satisfy their yearning for happiness, but they discovered such a hope was illusory, because, as de Tocqueville added, “the incomplete joys of this world will never satisfy [the human] heart.” This strange melancholy manifest itself in many ways, but it always leads to the despair of not finding what you thought you were looking for.

When you lose the ultimate source of your meaning or your hope, there are no alternate sources to turn to. And it breaks your spirit. De Tocqueville said that the cause of this “strange melancholy,” which permeates our society even today, comes from taking some “incomplete joy of this world” and building your whole life around it. That’s the definition of idolatry. And that’s what the woman in Keller’s church did with her son.

The way forward out of this despair and the way to find joy and freedom in life is to discern the idols of our hearts, and the idols of our culture, and to name them, to repent of them, and to give our hearts to God. The only way to free ourselves from the destructive influence of these counterfeit gods is to turn back to the One true and living God, who revealed Himself both on Mount Sinai and on Mount Calvary – in the giving of the Ten Commandments and in the death of His Son Jesus Christ on the Cross. God is the only Lord who, if you find Him, can truly fulfill you, and, if you fail Him, can truly forgive you. And that’s the only way you and I will ever find joy and freedom in this life. It’s found in a relationship with God and by making Him first in your heart.

Conclusion.

The central plot device in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is the Dark Lord Sauron's Ring of Power, which corrupts anyone who tries to use it, however good his or her intentions are. The Ring is what author Tom Shippey calls "a psychic amplifier," which takes the heart's fondest desires and magnifies them to idolatrous proportions.⁴

It turns the good thing into an absolute thing, and it overturns every other allegiance or value. The wearer of the Ring becomes increasingly enslaved to it. He must have it, and therefore it drives him to break rules he once honored and to harm others, and even himself, in order to get it. Idols are spiritual addictions that lead to terrible evil. This is true not only in Tolkien’s novel; it’s also true in real life as well.

Do you worship God alone, or is there a rival in your heart? What else and who else is there in your life that is more important to you than God is? What is the

“ring of power” that is drawing you away from the Lord? Think about it and write it down on your bulletin. Is it your children, your reputation, your job, your success, your spouse, your possessions, your good health? What is it that you look to for your security or your sense of identity more than God? What is the idol in your heart which God wants you to name and renounce today?

John Blanchard had a test when he met Hollis Maynell in Grand Central Station during World War II. She wanted to gauge his commitment and see if she would be his first and only true love regardless of appearances. God has a test for you and me, too, and He says, “Have no other gods before Me.” It’s a command the people of Israel needed to hear over 3,000 years ago, and it’s a command we need to hear today as well. May God help us order our loves rightly, and may we keep God first in our hearts – now and always. Amen.

¹ Adapted from “Promised to Keep,” *Focus on the Family Magazine*, June 1989, 21-22, cited in Max Lucado, *And the Angels were Silent*, 140-141.

² Philip Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Story* (Wheaton: Crossway Books), 517.

³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper, 1988), 296.

⁴ Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 36.