

# No Other Gods Between Us

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Preacher: Darrell Johnson

[ 0 : 0 0 ] to remember this event and then to write these words for us and i pray now that you would bring us into the reality of which they speak as never before for we pray it in jesus name amen is this on okay now it's on in this yet another vividly told story about the spreading of the gospel of jesus christ into the roman empire luke the author of acts gives us a picture of the impact the gospel is to have on both individual lives and the life of our city the gospel of jesus christ is this good good news that the living god who made heaven and earth has come to the world as a human being as the man jesus of nazareth and that he has come to give himself for us on a cross in order to set us free from all that keeps us from being who he designed us to be and that he rose from the grave victor over sin and evil and death and is alive calling us to himself and inviting us to share his own eternal life in the story in acts 19 taking place in the first century city of ephesus luke is giving us a picture of the fundamental effect believing this gospel is to have on human life private and public personal and civic religious and secular what do i mean luke says at that time after the apostle paul's three years of ministry in the city there arose no small disturbance concerning the way no small disturbance is an intentional understatement it's a polite way of saying considerable disturbance about that time there arose no small disturbance concerning the way the term the way is the way luke has spoken of the jesus movement throughout the book of acts for jesus call is not for us to simply believe truths about him but to behave in ways that are consistent with the truths what the believers were saying about jesus in the city was causing no small disturbance but it was how believers were acting in light of what they were saying that was causing no small disturbance in the city luke is telling us that the gospel is to cause considerable disturbance both in individuals and in the city not the gospel is to stir up riots like took place in ephesus although it can and it has social chaos is not the intent of the gospel social transformation however is the intent of the gospel why because the gospel begins to mess with idols in individual minds and hearts

and in the heart and mind of cities believing the gospel of jesus christ is supposed to cause a fundamental shift away from worshiping false gods to worshiping and serving the true and living god whom we know in jesus christ as the apostle paul rejoices in his letter to the thessalonians you turned to god from idols to serve a true and living god that is what being saved is fundamentally all about a change of lords jesus christ taking the place on the throne of life where other gods have been living which by necessity involves the dethroning of other gods we worshiped and served before jesus broke through and took hold of us no small disturbance and that change in lords of lords does not simply impact our private and personal lives if this change is genuine it also impacts public and corporate life why if the city and nation in which we live is built upon and organized around false gods and idols then people turning from those false gods and idols will cause no small disturbance morally economically politically as i read and reread acts 19 i keep hearing the living god say what he said in the first of the ten commandments you shall have no other gods before me literally it is you shall have no other gods in my presence and where is god's presence everywhere where can i flee from your presence ask the psalmist answer nowhere the living god is everywhere all the time you shall have no other gods before me anywhere anytime you shall not let anyone or anything come between me and you anywhere anytime you shall not let anyone or anything take my place in your life anywhere or anytime why why does the living god give this command because in the first commandment as is the case with all of god's commandments god is telling us something about ourselves which we would have never deduced on our own god is telling us that we are made in such a way that only the living god can satisfy the longings of our hearts for we are made not only by god we were made for god in the first commandment god is paying us an incredible compliment we are so wonderfully constituted that only the infinite all-knowing all-powerful ever-present merciful just gracious creative eternal god can fill and fulfill us you shall have no other gods between you

and me now it turns out that this first commandment is also a promise you will  
you will have no other gods before me one day you will have no other gods between you and me  
blessed be his name in the story luke tells in acts 19 we see that god intends to keep that promise  
we see god fulfilling this promise what happened in ephesus is the fruit of the three-year ministry of  
the apostle paul two of those three years paul rented a teaching room in what was called the school  
of tyrannus where every day in the hottest part of the day when tyrannus and his staff took a break  
paul taught the gospel imagine that every day for two years opening up the fullness of the gospel  
luke tells us that as a result the gospel was spreading throughout the city in the section before the  
story we just read luke joyfully reports the name of the lord jesus was being magnified throughout  
the city the word of the lord was growing mightily and prevailing as is the case in our city right now  
Ephesus took great pride in being in the words of the town clerk the guardian of the temple of the  
great artemis at that time the temple of artemis or diana as the romans called her was one of the  
seven wonders of the world artemis was a virgin goddess worshipped as the goddess of fertility  
she was represented in statue form in a way that repulses us if you want to see it contact wikipedia  
later it's ugly to my mind gross would be a better word but to the ephesians she was all together  
beautiful evoking passionate adoration great is artemis of the ephesians was the creed chanted by  
the aroused worshippers in the temple the temple was served both by male and female priests the  
males had to be eunuchs because according to the mythology artemis was so alluring that only the  
eunuchs could handle her presence once a month the priests would put on the festival of artemis  
celebrated with wild drinking and sex orgies and the whole city was affected in one way or another  
by the cult of the sexualized idol not hard to imagine is it the business sector was particularly  
hooked into the cult especially the silversmiths who made these artemis statues and who made little  
miniature forms of the temple of artemis which people used as house shrines as little places for  
worship in their homes now here's the big point that luke is making in the story as more and more  
people in ephesus were coming into relationship with jesus christ artemis was no longer that  
alluring so more and more people stopped participating in the festivities and they stopped buying  
the cult paraphernalia sold at and around the temple a man named demetrius was one of these  
silversmiths and he could see the writing on the wall he could see the effect the gospel was having  
on the city and he was scared so he calls together other other silversmiths and other trade workers  
who were involved in business around artemis and demetrius first tries to summarize what he hears  
paul teaching demetrius says you see in here that not only in ephesus but in all of asia this paul has  
persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people saying gods made with hands are not  
gods at all actually demetrius is misrepresenting what paul was teaching for paul's focus was not on  
the gods made with hands but on the living god who was not made with hands that is paul did not  
begin by calling people away from god's made with hands he began by preaching the living god  
who is not made with hands and calling people to him demetrius also misunderstood paul in  
another way paul not only argued that gods made by human hands are not gods paul argued that  
gods made by the living god are not gods you see the worship of artemis was in essence the  
worship of mother nature in worshiping artemis the ephesians were elevating a natural process of  
fertility up to the divine they were making what god made into a god which people have done for  
centuries in the deepest jungles and  
in the most sophisticated research labs worshiping creation rather than the creator in preaching the  
living god who has come to us in person in jesus christ paul was coming up against this worship of  
creation demetrius demetrius did however accurately summarize the consequences of what paul  
was teaching when people find jesus they no longer worship mother nature in fact when people find  
jesus they discover there is no mother nature creation creation may be our sister as saint francis  
used to emphasize but creation is not our parent the living god is our parent our life is in god in  
jesus realizing what the gospel was doing demetrius then makes an impassioned appeal he says to  
his business friends if this continues the temple is going to become useless and our status in the  
roman empire is going to be decreased and the goddess herself she whom asia and the whole  
world worships is going to be dethroned it's demetrius word dethroned dethroned from her  
magnificence and the way built around her and revolving around her is going to change no small  
disturbance demetrius speech was very persuasive his fellow entrepreneurs were enraged the  
crowd began to shout great is artemis of the ephesians over and over again the commotion grew to  
such an extent that the city was on the verge of a riot a town meeting was called held in the great  
outdoor amphitheater which still exists and for nearly two hours these people keep shouting great is  
artemis of the ephesians thankfully the city is saved from chaos by the cool-headed town clerk he

calls the people to calm down he argues that paul has not committed sacrilege he has not stolen anything from the temple he has not defaced the temple and paul has not committed blasphemy he's not said anything he's not against the goddess he's not defamed the goddess and the town clerk argues if artemis is a real god as the myths claim then there's nothing to worry about if she's a real god she can hold her own in the marketplace the fact is demetrius anxiety and rage only reveals that deep down inside he's not sure about artemis he's revealing the fact that he's suspicious that is she's only an idol and always in danger of being dethroned as more and more people in ephesus came to know the true god in jesus christ more and more people walked away from the artemis cult they quit buying the merchandise of the cult and demetrius was faced with the essential call of the disciple of the gospel of the gospel who will be lord the gospel affects a change of lords the enthronement of jesus which by necessity means the dethronement of all other lords and this change of lords will impact the city the nation the world built upon and revolving around dethroned lords the kingdom of the kingdom of the kingdom of the kingdom of the kingdom of the what are the idols where we live where are the temples shaping life in our city i commend to you a book by james k smith of calvin college entitled desiring the kingdom james smith desiring the kingdom

[ 17 : 33 ] smith argues as did saint augustine that as human beings we are the creature who worships we were created to worship we are homo liturgicus we cannot help but worship and smith argues i think rightly that religion is not just a set of beliefs and doctrines but a way of life all human beings he writes are at root believers who are committed to and oriented by fundamental collection of beliefs that even if not reflected upon govern and control our being and doing in desiring the kingdom smith suggests that there are three great temples of worship in our time what would you suggest they are three great temples in our time ready they are the mall the sports stadium and the university and most of life in our city revolves around those three temples and most of the people who are living in the church in our city is in the church in the church he has a section that you simply have to read you can probably google it where he imagines a martian coming to earth and trying to figure out what we humans are all about the martian goes to the mall and as he watches us at the mall he makes some certain deductions about what it means to be human.

He sees that everything in the mall is designed to nurture desire. Our desire for more, for better, for more beautiful, for more comfortable, for more secure.

Everything in the mall is designed to help us worship. So too in the stadium, and so too the university.

Then the gospel starts getting a hold. The good news of Jesus and his kingdom. And more and more people come into vital relationship with Jesus.

They begin to experience the kingdom life. And more important, more people begin to ask, what does the coming of the kingdom have to do with the mall?

[ 20 : 12 ] And what does the coming of the kingdom have to do with the stadium? And what does the coming of the kingdom have to do with the university? Things start to change.

No small disturbance. At least, that, says Luke, is what is supposed to happen.

If this change in Lourdes is happening, Luke says, there should be greater and greater impact on the idols of the city if the change is taking place.

Which brings us to the question, I think, Acts 19 poses for us. Are we, who name the name of Jesus, truly changing Lords?

Or, are we trying to do what God's people tried to do before the coming of Jesus? Serve Yahweh and the gods of the surrounding culture.

[ 21 : 20 ] The people wanted Yahweh and all he has to offer, but the people also wanted the other gods and what they supposedly offer. Oh, yes, Israel regularly attended worship services, regularly sang the praises of Yahweh, but they also worshipped other gods, mostly Baal, the fertility god.

Fertility god keeps coming around. One could say that they were only half converted. They had turned to Yahweh, but they had not yet turned away from the other gods who demanded their devotion and allegiance.

What if believers in Jesus in our city were to become fully converted? What if we were to stop worshipping and serving the idols of our culture and worshipped only Jesus?

Jesus, no small disturbance. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall have no other gods in my presence.

You shall have no other gods between me and you. Again, why this command? Because God is lonely and wants attention? Because God is afraid and wants company?

[ 22 : 47 ] Or because God is this egomaniac narcissist who wants constant praise to prop up his own sense of identity? No. God commands us not to let any other god come between him and us because he knows who we are.

He knows that only he can make us whole. He invites us to enter into and enjoy a love relationship with him. God is our passionate lover and he does not want us to let any other lover take his place. And the good news is God will not tolerate for long any other lover taking his place. No god, however lovely, is going to be allowed to take his place because no other god, however lovely, can make us whole.

Flee from idols, the apostle John says toward the end of his life. An idol is anything or anyone occupying the place in our lives which only the living God has right to occupy.

Thomas Oden, who is a Christian theologian psychiatrist, helps us here. He writes, A god is a finite value elevated to centrality and imagined as the final source of meaning.

[ 24 : 08 ] A god is some ordinary limited value which becomes necessary for one's self-validation. Idolatry is an overvaluing of a limited value in such a way that it is regarded as pivotal for one's sense of identity.

In short, a god is a central value by which all other values are to be valued. Anything can become a god.

Any good in the created order is subject to potential idolatry. And then Oden argues what I've tried to argue over the years. Any potential idol must be good or at least appear to be good or it would not be a candidate for idolatry.

If it promises no fulfillment, says Oden, it has no power to tempt us to worship it or to order our lives around it. If education were not a profound source of human enrichment, then it would not become a potential source of idolatry.

But precisely because it is of great value to us, it can be idolatized as a source of absolute meaning in our lives. If our nation were not a rich milieu for value enhancement, then it would not become a source of idolatry.

[ 25 : 24 ] But precisely because it is of great value, it tempts us to make an idol of it. If my relationship to my daughter were not a source of affection and delight, it could not become a potential idol for me.

But precisely because it has been of great value to me, it can enter into my imagination as an absolute value. I am tempted to adore her in a way we both know is disproportional.

Even a new building can become an idol. Wait until you see the architectural drawings this morning. Oh my, I think there is even going to be a model out there.

It is a spectacular building. It is going to stand out as one of the great wonders of Vancouver. When people take pictures of Vancouver, they are going to take pictures of this building.

And we will be tempted to think that because we have grand new facilities and we sit in the reflected glory of this great tower, we will be tempted to think, now, finally, we will be the church people will want to attend.

[ 26 : 42 ] Soon after we began the project, Dr. Jim Houston urged me to read the book, *The Spire*, by William Golding. You might know the name William Golding. He is more famous for his book, *The Lord of the Flies*.

The spire is a scary investigation of the soul and mind of an Anglican priest who is bent on having a beautiful new spire on top of the sanctuary.

I say scary because the priest slowly starts to compromise gospel values and ends up losing his soul. Anything, anyone, anyone, can become an idol in our soul.

The question then becomes, how can we spot such idols in our soul even as we seek to worship and serve only Jesus? I suggest that we ask questions of ourselves.

Not just once but on a regular basis. And it would be ideal to ask and answer these questions with a trusted spiritual companion. Okay? We're coming to the end now.

[ 27 : 51 ] These are eight questions. It says five on your notes but I didn't want to scare you that there were eight. Eight questions I regularly ask my soul.

Question one, what is the keynote of my conversation? What do I talk about the most? Jim Wallace of the Sojourner Community in Washington, D.C.

writes this. Listen to the conversation of most middle class Americans. A very large part of it revolves around consumption. What to buy, what was just bought, what products are preferred, where to eat, what to eat, the price of the neighbor's house, Vancouver, what's on sale this week, our clothes or somebody else's clothes, the best car in the market this year, or where to spend vacation.

The repeated subject of our everyday conversations are good clues to our real lords. Question two, about what am I regularly anxious?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, you cannot serve two masters, and then he says in the next line, therefore do not be anxious. I pointed out when we worked our way through the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus is telling us that excessive worry, restless anxiety, is usually a sign of trusting in some false god.

[ 29 : 15 ] The anxiety is caused by the fear that this god, one of these idols, is being threatened. We're anxious because the god in which we have placed trust is beginning to wobble, and we don't think it's going to stand.

Listen to anxiety. Our spirits are unconsciously realizing that an idol cannot deliver. Question three, for what am I willing to sacrifice?

For what am I willing to sacrifice my time, my health, my wealth, my commitments? At what altar do people in our city sacrifice their time, their wealth?

Some will do anything to get people's approval. There's a potential idol. Some will do anything to get a promotion. There's a potential idol. Some will do anything to sustain their lifestyle.

There's a potential idol. In the service of which we have to ignore the cry of the poor and the refugee. In the service of which we dare not talk about global warming.

[ 30 : 20 ] What are we willing to sacrifice, what we are willing to sacrifice our life and the lives of our family for is a good clue to our everyday Lord. Question four, how do I spend my money?

You knew that would be in the list. You just knew it. For how we spend our money is the great revealer of our values. And Jesus teaches us that money is not neutral.

It's not a neutral reality. Mammon is a powerful spiritual God. And how we relate to mammon is the revelation of what's on our soul. So, in God's love for us, He gives us something to do to check the power of mammon.

Do you know what it is? Tithe. Give away the first 10%. It not only provides more for others, but it breaks the grip of mammon in the soul.

And in the mystery of God's ways, the 90% goes further than the 10% that we want to keep, the 100% we want to keep. Question five.

[ 31 : 34 ] What gives me a sense of security about the future? What gives me hope for the future? Because I'm basically healthy? Praise God. But there's a potential idol.

Because I live in a democratic country? Praise God. Another potential idol. Because I have a caring spouse? Again, praise God. But another potential idol. Because I bothered to save for the future? Good move. But a richly potential idol. When we look out at the future, what gives us hope? The living God? The coming of Jesus?

Or something else? However good. Question six. When am I afraid to name the name of Jesus? What am I facing when I fear that to name the name of Jesus will mean I lose?

That is, where am I willing to compromise my allegiance to Jesus? I'm not saying that we have to name Jesus all the time. There are times when it really is strategic not to.

[ 32 : 39 ] But you know what I mean. There are those times when it is time, but we don't do it because we're afraid we're going to lose. Lose what?

The answer is a possible idol. Question seven. What do I love more than anything else? Here we're on very tender ground.

But it is ground where idolatry is most possible. I love sharing. I love my children and my grandchildren.

one is especially attached to me. But no one in my family can have the place in my heart which only Jesus deserves and desires because no one in my family can bear the weight of worship.

They cannot be what only Jesus can be for me. Here's what I'm learning. If I do not put them in the place where only Jesus desires, I begin to see them in Jesus.

[ 33 : 52 ] And I begin to see Jesus loving them. And I find myself joining Jesus loving them. And I find myself wanting them to love Jesus more than anything else.

I want Sharon to love Jesus more than she loves me she does. And I want my grandson forgive me  
I want my grandson to love Jesus more than he loves his grandpa.

One day I'm going to be gone but not Jesus. He's the only lover who never leaves. One more  
question.

How do I define myself? When people say so who are you? What do you say? What we worship  
shapes our self-identity.

Who are you? The answer reveals a potential idol. I am an adopted child of the heavenly father.

[ 35 : 08 ] I'm a bond servant of Jesus his son. I'm a temple of the Holy Spirit. Embracing the gospel  
of Jesus Christ this incredibly good good news of God's coming to us in person is supposed to bring  
about a change in Lourdes and this change in Lourdes is supposed to impact the city we live.

No small disturbance. you shall have no other gods before me. You shall have no other gods  
between you and me.

It is a command but given who is the commander it is also a promise. you will have no other gods  
before me.

One day there will be nothing between you and me.