

Our Exclusive God

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[0 : 0 0] Well, the other day, my daughter made some special perfume for my wife, Michelle. She got some rose petals from our front rose bush there and mixed them together with water.

It added something else, I'm not quite sure, but it made for an interesting aroma, shall we say. And then she offered to do Michelle's makeup for her, and this is her way of loving her.

And Michelle's way of loving Megan was to let her do it, because when you see the next slide, this is what it ended up like. And Michelle also showed love towards me by letting me show you this photo this morning, despite it being hugely embarrassing.

You see, we show love often towards people by action. Not always making perfume and doing makeup, but you get the point. And it's the same with God.

God showed love towards us in action by firstly giving his only son, Jesus, to die for us. And we, in response to that, are to love God in action.

[1 : 0 7] As Jesus said last week, we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. And we're to love our neighbor as ourselves. For us as Christians, these are the two great commandments.

And as we saw last week, God's Old Testament law helps us to flesh that out, helps us to know what it looks like. Even those seemingly random laws that we normally just skip over.

So let me just recap for you from last week, particularly if you weren't here. Last week, I tried to show you that Christ has fulfilled the Old Testament law, Matthew 5, 17.

He has therefore freed us from having to obey it. And yet Christ did not come to abolish the law either. Because it can still teach us.

And so on the next slide, I said that it helps us to understand three things better at the top there. It helps us to understand Christ's work better. You know, the sacrifice for sin from the laws about sacrifices and so on.

[2 : 1 2] It helps us to understand God's character better. But it also helps us to know how to love God and others better. And when we come to the Old Testament laws about how Israel was to treat God or others, instead of just skipping over them as kind of, well, I don't know what to do with that one, I suggested that we ask four questions so that we can still apply it to ourselves.

And those four questions are listed there. So we'll just leave that slide up for a moment. Now, I worked through some examples with you, and not only to show you, but also to teach you to do it for yourself.

Because as I said last week, my job is not just to preach, but to teach. So let me do one more example with you to reinforce the idea. Last week, we looked at the end of Exodus chapter 22, which was a whole lot of random laws.

So turn there again to the last verse, which we didn't get to last week. We ran out of time. So come to the last verse of chapter 22. So last week, we looked at verses 21 to 27, I think it was, which was about how to love others, particularly the needy.

We looked at verse 29 and 30 about giving to God. And then verse 31 says this, Now, when we read that, we go, oh, okay, that's interesting.

[3 : 37] Yeah, good. If I ever come across a dead cow on the side of the road, I won't carve it up for T-bone steaks or anything like that. I'll take it home for Fido. No, we don't think that. We just go, oh, that's a bit random.

I'll skip over it. But we ask these four questions, don't we? So the first question is, who is it helping us to love, God or others? Well, it's about being holy to God. So not rhetorical.

Who's it helping us love? God. Yeah, that's right. And second question, what principle of love is there? Well, Israel was not to eat certain animals, not because it was a health issue, because the other nations were doing it as well.

And presumably, if it was all feste and, you know, not even the other nations would eat it either. Rather, it was a holiness issue, not a health issue. They were to be holy, which means not just morally pure, but set apart, set apart from the nations and for God.

That's how they were to show love towards God who saved them. And so the third question, does the New Testament have something to say about this idea of holiness, this principle of love?

[4 : 39] Well, yes, it does. So on the next slide, in 1 Peter 1, on the next slide, we read that, as obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct.

Since it is written, you shall be holy for I am holy. In other words, don't conform to the nations around us in our behavior, just like Israel wasn't to. Rather, we are holy or set apart for God.

And so the fourth question was, what might this look like for us today? Well, it means not living the world's way, but being set apart to live for God and his way. So for example, my father, who I think I've mentioned to you before, he taught at a public high school and in the staff room, it was a pretty rough school.

Excuse me. Can I grab that glass of water? Sorry. Just on the seat. In the staff room, they would often tell crude jokes.

So whenever they started things, whenever they started to tell crude jokes, he would just turn around and walk out of the classroom. So he wasn't going to be conformed to the pattern of the staff room, but he was set apart for God.

[5 : 55] That's one example of what it might look like today. The point is though, do you see how we can still approach this seemingly random law about wild beasts and so on, and it can still help us to love God.

We can still get application from it. Of course, as we come to the 10 commandments themselves, they're actually a lot easier to work out and apply. So let's look at the first one. Come back to chapter 20, verse one.

Here we read, and God spoke all these words. I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.

Here we come to the first commandment, which is clearly about loving God. How? Well, by having God as our only God, our exclusive God.

The word before me in verse three can give us the impression that, well, we can have lots of gods as long as none of them are before God, you know, as long as he's the top God and he's in front of them all.

[7 : 06] But there's a footnote in your Bibles. The original language where it talks about, it's literally before his face, which really means not in his presence. And so in your footnote, the better way to translate it is have no other gods besides him or me.

You see, like us, Israel lived in a world where there are lots of so-called gods, where the nations, nations worship multiple gods, but Israel was to have only one God.

They were to give the Lord their exclusive allegiance and loyalty. They couldn't have a bit of Baal or Moloch, the Canaanite gods. Rather, the Lord was to be their exclusive God.

Why? Well, partly because he is the one who just saved them and made them his people. You see, they were already in an exclusive relationship with him. Remember verse two from last week?

It said, I am the Lord, your God. There's already a relationship there. And so they are to respond to God by keeping that relationship exclusive, by giving God their exclusive loyalty and not worshipping other gods.

[8 : 20] And so this principle of love is very clear for us, isn't it? And to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength is to ensure that he alone is our only God, our exclusive God.

And if we can follow us, the next question, do we see this in the New Testament? Well, yes, we do. So on the next slide, when Jesus is tempted by the devil or Satan in the wilderness, we read, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.

All this I will give you, he said, if you will bow down and worship me. Jesus said to him, away from me, Satan, for it is written, worship the Lord, your God and serve him. What?

Only. Or later on, I think on the next slide, Matthew in Matthew chapter six, Jesus says, you cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve two gods.

And here he says, you cannot serve both God and money. See, God is to be our exclusive God. So what does this look like for us today? I mean, I doubt we're tempted to pursue other gods like Israel would have been, you know, actual statues of idols of Baal or Moloch and so on.

[9 : 32] But there are many things in this world, good things that we can turn into gods, aren't there? A God, you see, is something or someone we serve, above all else.

Something or someone that shapes our life, our desires, our motivations, our priorities. And in today's world, someone once said, rather eloquently, well, it all starts with the letter B.

They said, the big gods of our world are body, brains, and bucks. That's what they said. And it's true that they're often the common ones, aren't they? Our world is obsessed with the body, how we look, our health, exercise, sex, all things associated with the body.

And then there's brains or education such that parents often push and push their children, not to do their best, but to get the best. And they do that, of course, so they can get a good job and earn lots of bucks or money.

But I think we can add some more to body, brains, and bucks. Do you see, why do they want their children to earn lots of money? Well, because family is important and they want their children to have a comfortable life.

[10 : 49] And so alongside body, brains, and bucks, I suspect for Australians, there's also the God of comfort. You know, we want a comfortable life and that's what people work hard for.

And family, and perhaps sport, I guess. These are the things that can quickly turn into gods. And now, as I said, there's nothing wrong with looking after your body, earning money, wanting a good education for your children and grandchildren and so on.

But it's when they shape our lives more than God, that's when the problem comes. And that's when we have another God in the relationship.

And the Lord is no longer our exclusive God. We are no longer loving him. And so the question for us to ask is, is there anything that shapes our lives, our desires, our priorities more than God?

Because if it is family, if it is work, if it is money, then perhaps you've got another God in your relationship. I remember a parent in a Bible study, praying for their child who was about to do the VCE exam, which is about this time of year.

[11 : 59] And another member said, oh, we should pray that they get a really good mark. And the parent responded by saying, oh, no, just pray they will do their best and that whatever happens, they'll depend on God.

And it kind of thought, oh, yeah, you see, this parent's God is not brains. They're not praying for the best marks for their children so that they get a job with lots of money.

Now, this parent's God is the Lord. And so they rephrased the prayer point. Don't they pray they do their best and that they depend on God? Yeah, that's just a small way that demonstrates someone keeping God as God, having no other gods.

Oh, I'll take another family at our church. This was a little while back when we had the 4 p.m. service that met in the Hudson Taylor room. There was a family who arrived back from holidays at 345. It service started at four o'clock.

The caravan was full. The car was full. But instead of unpacking the car and saying, oh, look, we're not going to make church today. We're exhausted. Just got back from holidays. We've got lots of things to do and sort out.

[13 : 06] No, they just parked the car and van in the church full of stuff, walked in and came to church, knowing that they have to go back home and unpack it before going to work. It meant they wouldn't have a relaxing evening.

But you see, their God was not comfort and relaxation. Their God was the Lord. I'll take a person from 5 p.m. church. They finished university.

They were looking for work. And he told Mark Chu that he said, I decided not to pray for a good paying job, but a job with good hours so I can keep serving at church.

And in the end, God gave him both, actually. God won't always do that, just by the way. But the point is, this person from 5 p.m. church loved God by ensuring that the Lord was his exclusive God and not money.

I know you know this, but we need to be reminded of it because it's so easy to fall into the trap of having other gods, isn't it? But the Lord, we are to love God by having him as our exclusive God.

[14 : 10] And secondly, the second way we are to love God is by having no idols or images. Point to verse 4. Second commandment, you shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything, in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them, he says. Now, the word for image here is the same word as idol, a statue kind of thing.

In the ancient world, they would make idols or statues in the likeness of an animal or a human, and they would make them like that to represent their gods.

So, for example, in Egypt, which is where Israel had just spent the last 400 years, one of the gods is Ra, the sun god. I'm pretty sure you would have heard of him. Now, the Egyptians could not see Ra, but they could see birds and animals.

So, they carved an idol or a statue using what they could see to represent Ra. So, on the next slide, here is the idol for Ra. Do you see what they've done?

[15 : 13] It's got a human body with a bird head. It's a falcon, I think it is. And above that, they've got a round yellow circle. What do you think that represents? Is the sun god? Yeah, the sun. And they would use this idol, this image, to represent their god, and to worship their god with.

And so, while the first commandment is about having no other gods, the second commandment expands on that by saying, and don't have their idols either.

But I suspect the second commandment is actually doing more, more than that. It's also saying, and don't even make idols of me, says God. You see, Israel just spent, as I said, 400 years in Egypt, seeing Egyptians worship their gods with statues and idols.

And so, they might be tempted to think, well, we've got our own god now, let's make an image or an idol to represent him. And we'll use the idol to worship him, just like the nations.

And we know that we're thinking this, because it's only a few chapters later, when that's exactly what they do. Do you remember the golden calf incident? They go, oh, where's Moses?

[16 : 24] He's taking so long. Aaron, make us an idol to represent God. And so, they make a calf to represent the Lord. And then on the next slide, this is what Aaron says.

He says, well, this is what we read. He, that is, Aaron built an altar in front of the calf, and announced, tomorrow, there will be a festival to the Lord.

You see, the calf is not another god, but it's an idol to represent God, the Lord. But that's not how God wants them to worship him.

And so, the second commandment is about loving God, really, by worshiping him, his way, not the nation's way, with idols and images. And that's because there are three main problems with idols.

At first, they cannot truly represent God. And no idol or image can ever capture God's greatness, his power, his wisdom, his love, his glory.

[17 : 23] And if an idol cannot fully represent God, then by default, it's actually misrepresenting God. It's leaving something out. That's why the prophet Isaiah says on the next slide, he writes this, to whom then will you compare God?

What image will you compare him to? It's a rhetorical question. The answer is, no image. Because nothing can truly capture who God is.

He's too big for a statue, for canvas, for a stained glass window. So in the end, images simply misrepresent him. An image suggests he's something less than he truly is.

And a calf? Well, that's just plain offensive. I mean, how would you like it to be represented by a cow? So on the next slide, here is Mark Chu.

Oh, he's not here this morning. I'm picking on you. But if he was here, I'm offended for him. That's the first problem with idols. They can't truly represent God. The second problem is, God has actually told them what represents him, and that's his word.

[18 : 33] That's how he wants to be worshipped, by his word, not by idols. And so, on the next slide, in Deuteronomy, just before Moses gives them the Ten Commandments again, he reminds them of what happened here in Exodus.

And he reminds them of what happened when God spoke to them out of the fire. And he says that they only heard his voice, his word. They did not see any form of any kind.

And he says, therefore, watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt, and make yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, with a form like a man, or a woman, or like an animal.

You see, God was not represented by an image, but by his word. At Mount Sinai. And so, they're not to make images, or idols, to represent him. That's not how they're to worship him.

But the third reason for no idols, is because an idol ends up being worshipped itself, and ends up replacing God. In other words, the idol, you know, takes people's affections, and worship away from God, and becoming God themselves, which means we're back to breaking the first commandment.

[19 : 40] I remember back in 2008, 2008, I was living in Sydney, and it was World Catholic Youth Day, and they had this 1.6 metre statue of Jesus. And I think it was on the next slide.

Here it is. And it was made out of a mosaic of glass. It's there in Hyde Park in Sydney, in front of St. Mary's Cathedral. On the next slide, I think, is a closer picture of it, so you can see the mosaic.

People, because of the glass mosaic, we'd call it mirror ball Jesus, or disco Jesus, because of those disco balls, in the nightclubs and so on. And then, the Sydney Morning Herald, picked up this phenomenon, and the title, you can't read it, but the title says, in glass, they trust.

And then, halfway down the article, let me read some of it to you. The writer says, they kiss him, the statue, pray to him, light candles at his feet, and leave gifts, including a bunch of roses.

Now, do you see what has happened? They ended up worshipping, the image of Jesus, rather than Jesus himself. The idol ends up, replacing God, the Son, stealing people's affection, and worship from him.

[20 : 54] That's what idols end up doing. Even if it's an idol of God, they end up replacing God. They become a rival to God, which as I said, means we're back to breaking the first commandment.

So God says, no idols, Israel, not even of me. So what is the loving principle here? Well, to love God means we avoid idols that replace him, and rather worship him by his word.

Now, I need to say that that doesn't mean that we should now get rid of our stained glass window up here, or that we can't read children's Bibles that have pictures of Jesus in them.

The second commandment is not about no artwork or things like that. It's about idols that are worshipped. If we started worshipping that image up there, then I would do something about it.

I wouldn't smash it. I'd probably just cover it up. But it's no problem. See the difference? Rather, we're to worship God his way by his word. And when we come to the New Testament, we see the same thing.

[21 : 58] So on the next slide, I think it is, we are told in several places to flee from idols. We're also told down the bottom that good things can become idols like money, greed, which is idolatry.

You see, we're not to worship God by chasing after other things, even things that represent him. We're to worship him by his word. And who is the word become flesh? John 1.

It's Jesus. Thank you. I've got three, four people. Excellent. Yeah, Jesus. So on the next slide, I think it is, from John chapter 1.

I think I'll put it in. Barry, is it next slide? Again. So we've got John chapter 1 there. We're told that the word was God and he became flesh.

We're also told that Jesus is actually the true image of God. Or from Hebrews down the bottom there, he is the exact representation of God. Such that when we look at Jesus, we see God.

[23 : 00] In other words, we're not to create idols or images to represent God and worship him with. Rather, we are to worship God through Christ. The perfect word. The perfect image of God.

And what's more, the spirit also works primarily through the Bible, the word of God. And so when it comes to loving God with this second commandment, it means we don't make idols of anything, whether of money or other gods, or even representing our God.

Rather, we're to worship God through Christ and by his word in the Bible. Now, I doubt we're tempted to make physical idols of God here at Holy Trinity. Rather, I think the temptation for most of us as Christians is to create our own version or image of God in our minds.

And so it's like a mental idol, if you like, which is inconsistent with the Bible. Now, let me explain. I've heard, when it comes to the topics of marriage, sexuality, or even Jesus being the only way to God, I've heard Christians say, well, I don't believe God wants us to follow that today.

I don't believe in a God who would say that. And so what you see what they've done. They've come up with a new image of God that they follow. It's got this mental idol, if you like, and they're going to worship this mental idol of this God that they like, rather than the true God revealed in the Bible.

[24 : 22] That's what Christians are tempted to do and are doing today. That's how we break that second commandment, really, by coming up with this mental image or idol of God, which is not the true God revealed in the Bible.

And so it ends up replacing the true God. And that's what idols do. They replace God or become another God in the relationship and, and God will not tolerate it.

Why? Because he's jealous for us. Point three, chapter 20, verse five. So he says, no other gods, verse three, verse four, don't make an idol. Why?

Well, verse five, for or because I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

And here it says, God is a jealous God. And this is really the big reason, not just for the second commandment, but the first one as well. In fact, I think on the last slide there, Moses will say later on in Exodus chapter 34, do not worship any other God, commandment one.

[25 : 35] Why? Well, for, because the Lord, whose name is jealous, is a jealous God. And so this reason we have in the 10 commandments is really for both the first and second commandment.

We have no other gods, nor make idols, because verse five, God is a jealous God. Now, when we think of jealousy, we think it's always a bad thing.

And often it is. To be jealous of something or someone is to envy them. And that's bad. At least all sorts of issues, as we saw from James in our second reading.

But there's also a good type of jealousy where you're not jealous of someone or of their things, but rather you are jealous for them. So it's that you don't want to share them.

So for example, I am jealous for my wife, which means I do not want to share her with another guy. She is my wife. I am her husband. And so if I saw another man flirting with her or doing something like that, then I would be rightly jealous, not of her, but for her.

[26 : 42] You see, I'll put it differently. God is zealous for us. If you like, he does not want to share us with another God or idol.

For he saved us and made us his people. He put us in an exclusive relationship with him as our God. And such is his loyalty to us that if Israel cheats on him with another God or even an idol, then he will punish them.

Verse five. Now, when we read verse five, it sounds like God is going to chase after their children and grandchildren, great grandchildren down to the fourth generation. But that's not what is going on here.

Rather, it's talking about the effects of punishment on the first generation, having a natural impact or being felt by the third and fourth generation. because our sin impacts others.

Let me illustrate. Michelle's great, great grandfather, I think it is, was the first person in Britain to have color printing. And because of that, he was rich.

[27 : 46] And I'm told that even parts of England are named after him. But his idol was money. He loved money and wanted more of it, even though he was rich.

He was greedy. And because of that, God let him chase after his idol. And it came with consequences, including gambling to get more money.

And the gambling turned into an addiction. And the addiction led to bankruptcy. But these consequences were then felt not just by him, but his children, then his grandchildren, great children, all the way down to Michelle and me.

We could have been rich. But you see what God is talking about here? If we replace him with an idol or worship other gods, then he'll give us over to them and the consequences that come with it.

And those consequences impact others. But notice his love in verse six, in contrast to the third and fourth generation that'll feel the effects of his punishment.

[28 : 52] Love, verse six, is felt by a thousand generations. See the contrast? It's a love and mercy is really what God delights in. He does not delight in punishment.

The Bible talks about his punishment as his strange or alien work. It's not what comes naturally to him. Rather, his natural disposition is love and mercy. That's what he delights in.

That's what is on offer to a thousand generations, even the third and fourth, even the generation that sinned. In other words, to every generation. And again, as we come to the New Testament, we can see this in Christ.

Remember that famous verse, John 3, 16, for God so loved the world. What did he do? He did an action. He gave his one and only son so that who?

So that anyone or everyone, who believes not just one generation, but anyone from every generation who believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.

[29 : 52] See, God's love is on offer to every generation. You see, we've all at some time or other worshipped other gods, whether the gods of body, brains or bucks, or comfort, family, sport.

And we've all created images of God, which were less than God or misrepresentations of God. And yet, if we turn to Christ, trust in him, then we will know God's love, his mercy, his forgiveness.

And so can I ask, have you done that this morning? Have you put your trust in Jesus? And for us who have, then we are to keep doing the same thing. We are to keep trusting in Jesus.

And we are to worship and love God by having no other gods, nor idols. Because it's very easy to have them. And perhaps this year, more than any other year, the biggest God in Melbourne at the moment is political correctness.

such that we think the world's way and are scared to think any other. With just under two weeks to go in the marriage vote, I'm still hearing of Christians who buy into the world's logic and follow the God of political correctness.

[31 : 05] Vote yes, instead of following the God of the Bible and his way. And so we need to come back and ask for forgiveness, don't we? Come with me to our second reading and we'll finish here.

Page 12, 18. We'll pick it up at verse 4. James writes to his church, which is astonishing really. He says, You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God?

Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. You see, James' readers were having more than one God in their relationship, weren't they?

They were following the ways of the world. Verses 1 to 3, they were arguing and quarreling. They were envying, asking with wrong motives, seeking to spend what they get on their pleasures, verse 3.

They were the gods they had in the relationship. And so God calls them, or James calls them, adulterous. And when we hear that, we realize that having other gods is serious, isn't it?

[32 : 08] If we are in a relationship with God, then chasing after other gods is like committing adultery. It's serious. It's incredibly unloving to God. And God will not tolerate, verse 5, because he is jealous for us.

Do you not think, scripture says without reason, that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? He doesn't want to share us with others. He gave up his only son for us.

He doesn't want to share us with other gods. And so James' solution, verse 6, but he gives us more grace, love to a thousand generations. That is why scripture says, God opposes the proud, but shows favor to the humble.

Submit yourselves then to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God, and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded, serving two gods.

Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning, and your joy to gloom. In other words, repent, humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

[33 : 12] See, we are to love God who loved us by having no other gods but him, nor having idols, even idols that represent him. But we are to worship him by his word become flesh, and by his word in scripture.

And if we're not doing that, then please repent, and please love God. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we thank you for your Old Testament law, that while we are not bound to obey it, it is incredibly helpful in showing us how to love you in response to first loving us.

And so, Father, we pray that you would help us to have no other gods but you in our lives. And, Father, we pray that you would also help us to not worship you by idols or images, but by your word.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.