

God on Top

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
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Scripture: Matthew 19:16-30

Come, follow me.

Matthew 19:21

Sermon

The issue is idolatry, and it's as old as the human race. We human beings are always looking for something we can trust instead of God or for something we can trust alongside of God. No wonder the first commandment says, "No other gods but me!"

SPEAKING OF THE COMMANDMENTS, a certain man came to Jesus one day. He wanted to enter the Kingdom of God. And he was looking for a key. He was looking for the key that would unlock the door to the Kingdom.

Jesus told him to keep the commandments. But there are 613 commandments in the Old Testament. So the man gathered his wits and asked for the master key. "Which ones?" he said.

Jesus rattled off a half dozen commandments. Then the man said, "I've got all those covered. There has to be something more." He was right. And Jesus got to the heart of it. He said, "Sell all your stuff. Give the money to the poor. Then come and follow me."

When he heard this, the man was sad. He was sad because he had a lot of stuff. He was sad because Jesus was telling him, "No other gods but me!" Let me take a moment to explain that.

WHEN JESUS TELLS THE MAN which commandments to keep, he works with the Ten Commandments and he rattles off commandments five through nine. Those commandments are all about our obligations to each other. Then Jesus adds the summary of those commandments: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

For some reason, though, Jesus doesn't mention the first four commandments, the commandments about our obligations to God. He doesn't mention those commandments at all. Jesus also doesn't mention the summary of those commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength."

So Jesus doesn't mention the "God commandments," not at all. But those commandments are not missing from the conversation. Actually, those commandments are at the heart of the conversation.

You see, the last thing Jesus tells the man is this: "Come, follow me." And that is how the "God commandments" are kept. They are kept by following Jesus. Because Jesus is the one true God. Because Jesus is the one and only true image of God. The "God commandments" are kept by following Jesus. Because Jesus is the glorious name of God, full of grace and truth. And because Jesus is the Sabbath rest of God's people.

So when Jesus says, "Come, follow me," he is telling the man, "No other gods but me!" And the man, rich as he is, he isn't ready for that.

THE ISSUE IS IDOLATRY. And I learned something about that last week. [Here] at IBC, guys were telling me that the most common idolatries in prison are when guys put themselves first. Newsflash: the same thing is true on the outside! But inside, to take one example, you have guys who pile up all kinds of stuff from the store. And they put their trust in that stuff, in their prison wealth, because it buys friends. And that helps them to be on top.

Then there are the guys who have no money. So they have no store. But you know how it is with some of them. They have muscle instead. They have violence. They have intimidation. That's their currency. And they know how to spend it to keep themselves on top.

It's all about being on top. It's all about being first. It's all about pushing your way to the front of the line. But here's the thing. Someone put it this way. You can't be first if you're following. And that's a simple fact. You can't be first if you're following. And Jesus says, "Follow." He says, "Follow me." So for us, it's never about being first. We know many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first.

DURING FIRST HOUR, YOU TALKED about your life on the outside. You talked about the things you used to trust in. Things that made you feel important. Things that made you feel powerful. Or things that made you feel numb.

But once Jesus gets ahold of you, everything starts to change. You don't need to feel important anymore. Because Jesus is the important one. And besides, you are important—important enough that Jesus loves you, important enough that Jesus died for you, important enough that Jesus sends the Spirit to you.

And you don't need to feel powerful anymore. Because Jesus is the powerful one. And because with Jesus, power is made perfect through weakness. And besides, in

Christ, when you are weak, then you are strong! And you can do everything through the One who gives you strength.

And you don't need to feel numb—except when you're in the dentist's chair. You don't need to feel numb anymore. Because Jesus already bore the pain. Because Jesus already endured the shame. And besides, in Jesus, you are coming alive, more alive than you've ever been before. Because brand new life is being born inside you!

ALL OF YOU KNOW THE POWER DYNAMICS in prison better than I ever will. You know how the food chain works. You know how the pecking order is established. And you know the challenges faced by anyone who dares to leave everything behind. You know the challenges faced by anyone who dares to follow Jesus. You know the challenges faced by anyone who dares to trust in Jesus alone for safety and salvation, even in the spots the security cameras don't cover.

You know the temptation to trust something else instead of Jesus or to trust something else alongside Jesus. I'm not going to say what those things are. But you know the temptation to be wise as serpents without also being gentle as doves. You know it in ways that we, your outside brothers and sisters—you know all that in ways we never will.

So teach us. We'll listen. And we'll pray for you. We'll lift you up to the Father. And if you stumble and fall because it's too hard, because you can't thread the needle—and not because you're a rich man trying to hang on to your “stuff”; you're just trying to stay in one piece—if you stumble and fall, we will lift you up to the Father in prayer. We all will, inside members and outside members. That's what it means to be church!

BROTHERS, PRAY FOR US ON THE OUTSIDE, TOO. The issue is idolatry. And on the outside, we have idols of our own. It's a human thing. It always has been. We human beings churn out idols faster than Foxconn churns out iPhones.

For some of us on the outside, those iPhones are idols. They're not like biblical idols, though. They're not like the idols that Isaiah and the Psalms make fun of. No; unlike biblical idols, our electronic idols have eyes and they do see. They have ears and they do hear. They have mouths and they do speak. And this is whether we want them to or not! If Siri were here, she'd tell you.

We don't worship Siri. But we do bow our heads to her and seek her blessing, dozens and dozens of times a day. We don't worship Siri. But we do listen to her word as she Googles the world for us. We don't worship Siri. But we do obey her instructions: “In one mile, turn left onto 28th Street.”

SO MANY IDOLS! An idol is anything we trust instead of or alongside of God. On our money it says, "In God we trust." But the actual list of things we trust is almost endless: the NRA and the ACLU; the KKK and the NAACP; MDOC and CPI; LeBron James and Joel Osteen; Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump; the Constitution and the free market; sex and drugs and rock 'n roll; the bomb and the flag and the pill.

So many idols! And an idol is not determined by what it is or by what it does. An idol is determined by what we do with it. Martin Luther said, "Whatever your heart clings to and confides in—that is really your god."

So, brothers and sisters, inside and outside, may our hearts cling to Jesus Christ and confide in him alone. Because Jesus is our faithful Savior. And in him we have everything we need, for this life and for life in the coming Kingdom of God. Because Jesus is the master key!

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Glory and thanks be to God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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