

Out of Darkness

Exodus 5:8-10

I love to eat. In fact I love to eat so much, I often end up overeating. When I was in high school and college, I remember piling it in and I don't remember having any negative effects. But as I've gotten older that has drastically changed. Now if I overeat, I feel absolutely terrible. My stomach hurts because of all the pressure. I have trouble breathing. There's indigestion. And within about an hour my legs start feeling so crazy I think they're going to explode. My temperature rises; I start to sweat. And I have a really hard time falling asleep. This has happened often enough that I know every time I overeat, I'm going to feel miserable.

But about two weeks ago Amy and I went out to eat at my favorite restaurant – Red Robin – and guess what I did?... They have these delicious gourmet burgers that come with bottomless fries and this campfire sauce that's heavenly. Amy got those, but I had to upgrade to their mouthwatering sweet potato fries and ranch dressing, so both of us could share. The combination of the gourmet burger and bottomless fries usually results in me overeating all by itself, but on that occasion, I also had a coupon for a free appetizer. So before the burger and fries even got there, we ate an order of boneless barbeque wings, and chances are good that I may have eaten more than half. Amy ended up not finishing all her burger because she's smart, but I didn't have the heart to let it go, so I ate that too. I knew exactly what was going to happen, but I couldn't help myself. The food tasted so good I overate big time. And then I paid for it for the next several hours.

I wanted to share that story because I think we have the tendency to do something very similar in how we live our lives today – we keep going back to things that are appealing on the surface but end up hurting us in the end. This is a behavior that has plagued humans from the very beginning and has led to very serious consequences, and it ties in directly with the passage we are going to study for today.

This morning we're going to talk about the second of the Ten Commandments and my story of overeating has a lot to do with why God gave his people that command. God doesn't give us his commands to keep us in bondage; he gives us his commands to set us free, and this morning we're going to see how that applies to the second commandment.

Read Deuteronomy 5:8-10.

⁸ “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁹ You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ¹⁰ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

If you were here last week, you will probably notice that this command has a lot to do with the first one: “You shall have no other gods before me.” We’re talking about ancient polytheism again, which was rampant in the culture the Israelites had come from and would be going into. In fact it was rampant across the whole world at that time. Wherever you found humans, you found the worship of pagan gods and idols. And I think in order to understand the meaning behind the second commandment we need to understand the origins of idolatry a little better. There are a couple other passages of Scripture I want to look at to teach us where the worship of idols came from, why the ancient people did it, and what the characteristics of idolatry were. In Romans chapter 1, Paul writes about where idolatry came from and why people did it.

Read Romans 1:18-23.

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Idolatry was created by mankind way back in the beginning of human history in their stubborn refusal to acknowledge the one true God. Paul says in their ungodliness and unrighteousness, ancient humans knew God, but they refused to honor him as God or give thanks to him. Instead they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. In their darkened understanding they created distorted versions

of God, truth, and reality and decided to honor and worship them instead. All ancient humans, except for a very small percentage, were like this. That's why the ancient Egyptians did what they did and that's why the Canaanites did what they did. They created their own gods and their versions of truth and worship because they refused to follow the only true and immortal God.

To get a deeper look into what their worship looked like, I actually want to look at an occasion where the Israelites were doing it. The story of the golden calf is a shocking example of how deep of a stranglehold idolatry had on God's chosen people and shows us several characteristics of idolatry that were practiced worldwide. What makes this story shocking is the fact that God had just done all kinds of awesome miracles and signs and wonders to rescue his people out of the powerful empire of Egypt. But within weeks they were already turning away and going back to their old practices.

Read Exodus 32:1-6.

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."² So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."³ So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron.⁴ And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden^[a] calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord."⁶ And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

You see many of the basic characteristics of idolatry in this passage. To start with, rather than depending on the one true God to lead them, in verse 1 we see that the people demanded Aaron to make gods for them to lead them instead. So they were rejecting God and replacing him with their own false gods – that's at the root of all idolatry. The second thing you see is that these false gods were nothing more than man's own creation. They believed that gods came to dwell in the idols they created, so they fashioned idols using common material objects that they could see and understand and make up the rules for. Third, in verse 4, after Aaron

had fashioned a golden calf, they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” So instead of praising God for the awesome miracles he did right before their eyes to bring them out of Egypt, they gave credit and honor to the golden calf that Aaron had just made. Fourth, they came up with their own rituals for worship. Aaron decided to build an altar to give them a place to come and worship the calf and he designated the next day as a feast day for worship. Fifth, they offered sacrifices to their fake God – in their twisted understanding they believed their god had needs and if they met his needs he would in turn bless them. These offerings included food and animal sacrifice for the god to eat, drink offerings for the god to drink, and sometimes even blood or human sacrifice – for one god named Moloch, they even sacrificed their own children. And finally, their celebrations before the gods included all kinds of sensual activity: *“And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play”* – gluttony, drunkenness, and sexual immorality.

These were the common practices and characteristics of ancient idolatry that mankind practiced in various ways wherever they lived on earth. They did this because of their stubborn refusal to follow God and their desire to worship the way they wanted to instead. They worshipped idols because it was very appealing to them in their sinful nature. Doug Stuart, in his commentary on Exodus, summarizes why idolatry was so appealing to all of humanity.

1. Idolatry was a guaranteed formula for getting the attention of a god and getting things you wanted.
2. Idolatry was an easy religion – do whatever you want, just make sure you show up with your sacrifices.
3. Idolatry was convenient and normal – it was everywhere, and everyone was doing it.
4. Idolatry made sense in light of the variety of different nations on earth – every different nation had their own different gods.
5. Idolatry was pleasing to the senses – you could actually see your god in front of your very eyes.
6. Idolatry was indulgent and sensual – a perfect excuse to engage in gluttony, drunkenness, and sexual immorality.

Author and pastor Kevin DeYoung writes: “Can you see the attraction of idolatry? ‘Let’s see I want a spirituality that gets me lots, costs me little, is easy to see, easy to do, has few ethical or doctrinal boundaries, guarantees me success, feels good, and doesn’t offend those around me.’”

So idolatry ran rampant in the world filled with humans who stubbornly refused to follow the one true God and believe what was actually true. It was a worldwide delusion that ensnared people in darkness and sin. It was a practice that God HATED with intensity and evoked his righteous wrath and furious judgment. So when God called his chosen people and rescued them out of Egypt to set them apart for himself, to be distinct from all other people's and be a light for truth and salvation, he commanded them to not return to all those idolatrous ways. That's the second commandment. "Don't have anything to do with the pagan gods and don't have anything to do with the abominable practices that accompany them."

God wanted his people to experience a life that was so much better – life that was aligned with truth and reality. Life that was filled with promise and deep joy that wouldn't disappear like the temporary sensual thrills of idolatry. He wanted to rescue them from their blindness, misery, dead end cycle of depravity, and their ultimate condemnation because of their stubborn rebellion. But we all probably know, they kept going back. Like a pastor pigging out at Red Robin. They kept going back to the things that were appealing on the surface, but would deeply hurt them in the end.

Now, there are very few people who follow a religion that practices idolatry today in America. If you go to other countries you will find a different story, but in America that's not the case. But if you look at the characteristics behind ancient people's worship of idols, you will see all of those same characteristics today.

By nature, people want to suppress the truth about God and exchange it for a lie because of the ungodliness and unrighteousness inside them. So they refuse God – they refuse to honor him as God or give thanks to him. And they turn to created things instead. They turn to government leaders or social leaders or philosophers or lifestyle experts to lead them instead of God. They worship created things like celebrities, children, boyfriends/girlfriends, nature, houses, companies, cars, artwork and smartphones instead of God. They give credit to medicine, science, humanity, evolution, and the Big Bang, instead of God. They build altars for worship – sports stadiums, race tracks, concert halls, and television sets. They offer sacrifices of time, money, family, and more to pursue their modern idols. They celebrate sexual perversion, murder of children, and other abominable acts. The practices of idolatry are alive and well in our world today and our culture is

still immersed in its darkness. Mankind is still suffering the consequences and incurring God's wrath and judgment upon themselves.

But God is still calling his people out of that darkness and into the light through salvation in Jesus Christ. He reveals himself to us, shows us the truth, and leads us into a completely different way of life and worship. He gives us freedom from the futile ways of the world and joy and fulfillment that can only be found in him. And he does this all for our good.

Ephesians 4:17-24 says, "Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. ²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, ^[f] which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

God has called us to leave the fruitless deeds of darkness behind. We must no longer keep going back to things that are appealing on the surface, but will deeply hurt us in the end. And my hope for us this morning is that we can see that he does this for our good. Going back to darkness is like me going back to overeating – there's a temporary thrill, followed by a whole lot of trouble. Those who do will never find joy and fulfillment beyond the fleeting, temporary pleasures of self-indulgence and along with that will come the ever-increasing descent into corruption that ultimately ends in death and condemnation.

God doesn't want that for you! He wants so much more! So he calls us out of darkness and into the light. He gives us the second command for our good. Give up the self-indulgent, fleeting cravings of the flesh so that you can find everlasting joy and fulfillment in God. Do you see yourself reverting back to the practices of idolatry in your life? Are you setting God aside so you can devote yourself to something else? Let's confess these things to God and recommit ourselves in devotion to him.