

What is the First Commandment? You shall have no other gods before me. What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. The First Commandment is an easy commandment to remember, Christians, and the explanation is also easy for us to understand, so easy that even a child can know what it means. But the First Commandment is a commandment that is difficult to put into practice, because we are always in danger of having other gods. Which, of course, leads us to ask: what exactly do we mean by other gods? What is a god? I think Martin Luther in his Large Catechism puts it best when he says: "A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress." In other words, Christians, a god is anything that we expect help from in a time of need, and anything that we look to to protect us in every time of danger. But unfortunately, our sin so often leads us to look somewhere else than the living God. And Moses in our reading for today warns us against idolatry and warns us and shows us the danger that always comes with it.

When we meet Moses here in the book of Deuteronomy, he is speaking to the people of Israel as they are about to enter into the Promised Land. He is telling them everything that they need to know: how they should live and all the things that they should do. And in our reading in particular from Deuteronomy chapter 4, Moses is warning them against idolatry. He says in verse 23: "Take care, lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God, which he made with you, and make a carved image, the form of anything that the Lord your God has forbidden you." Now, the key word in that verse is the word "forget." Because when we forget, Christians, that's when we fall into idolatry. We fall into idolatry when we forget what God has done, when we forget what God has said, when we forget who God is. I think it's true to say that forgetfulness is the mother of idolatry.

But how is that the case? How do we forget everything that God has done? We can just look to Israel as an example of how this happens. Remember, they are just about to enter into the Promised Land. And God warns them as they're going into the land to take care and to watch out. They are supposed to drive out the Canaanites who are currently living there. Because if they don't, if they live among them instead, they would be exposed to their practices and to their false gods. And anything that we hear in the Old Testament that God says Israel should not do, you can almost guarantee that's exactly the kind of thing that the Canaanites were doing. But the Canaanites turned towards their false gods looking for help, looking for protection in times of distress. And they probably certainly believed that they got the help that they needed. By sacrificing to this idol, they believed that's what made the rains come. By bowing down before this altar, they would get the help that they needed. It all seemed to work, so to speak, and so they kept coming back to it again and again. But Israel, if they weren't careful, would look at that, and they would say: "Well, it seems to work for them, so why wouldn't it also work for me? And what's it going to hurt anyway? I'll just do a little bit here and there to make sure I get what I need, and I'll follow the Lord in everything else." But in this way, Christians, they forgot the Lord. They forgot that it is God who gives the rain. They forgot that it is God who gives them health. They forgot that God alone is the Lord, and so they turned away from him, looking to these idols to help them, even becoming like the Canaanites in all things.

And Christians, idolatry is still very much a danger for us today too, even if we aren't tempted to bow down before wood and stone the way that they were. Because idolatry happens any time, Christians, that we look for help from something other than God, whatever that thing may be.

Let's just take an example. Let's use money as an example. We might think that money is something that is going to get us everything that we need. That as long as I have enough of it, even if it's not all that much, but just enough of it, then I won't have to worry. I will be safe. I will be secure. But ask yourself this question, Christians: when that money runs short, what do you do? Do you turn to the Lord, asking him to help, asking him to provide for all of your needs? Or do you turn to your work or your job, thinking that as long as I work hard enough, I'll get more money and everything will be taken care of, and forgetting to pray in the process.

Or let's take people as another example. People can also be idols. Do I think that if I just impress the right person that I'll be able to get everything that I could ever want? Do I think that if we just put the right person into office, we'll fix all of the problems in this country? Do I think that what others think about me is the most important thing of all? But we end up forgetting that it is God's opinion that is the most important. We forget that the future belongs only to the Lord.

But we can see through these examples, Christians, why idolatry is always a danger. We are always at risk of putting something, anything above God. And when we do that, we forget God and his Word. And that's why Moses calls for us today to take care and to watch.

Because God does not take idolatry lightly, Christians. God is a consuming fire. He is a jealous God. Because the ultimate problem with idolatry is that it makes God into something less than what he actually is. It takes something that he has made or something that he has given and sets it up over him and worships that instead of the Lord. And God is not just going to sit by and let that happen. God will punish it and judge it for the terrible sin that it is. Because God alone is God. God alone is the Lord. God alone is the source of all good. God alone is our refuge in every distress. Without him, we are nothing, and without him, we have nothing. God alone is God, and he alone is the Lord, and to him belongs all things.

Now, of course, I know that we hear that word "jealous," Christians, and we might think that that's actually a bad thing. Jealousy often for us is something bad. Maybe it makes us think that God is just being possessive here, that he's making a big deal out of nothing, that God just doesn't want to share. Maybe he just needs to learn to share. But God's jealousy is actually a good thing, because ultimately, Christians, we belong to him. We are his creatures. He made us by his own power. We would not exist apart from him. Every breath that we take is a gift from him. Every moment that we live, we live according to his will. And God has given himself for us, Christians, above all in giving us his Son, Jesus Christ. God has laid down everything in order to save us. And every good thing that we have, whatever it may be in life, comes from him alone. We owe everything that we are and everything that we have to the Lord.

So to say, then, that these things actually come from something else is in fact an attack on God. It's like stealing credit for something that someone else did, or even denying that they did it at all. And we, of course, would be angry if that happened to us, wouldn't we? If someone took something that we had done and said that they had done it instead, we would be upset, and rightly so. They have stolen it from us. So why would it be any different with God? God is a jealous God, and he is right to be jealous for what is his own. And that is not something that we should take lightly.

Because ultimately, Christians, Moses shows us and especially shows Israel the consequences of their idolatry. If they were to persist in it, if they were to pursue it, God's wrath would burn against them. They would be driven out from the land and scattered among the peoples. And ultimately, as Moses says in verse 28: "There you will serve gods of wood and stone, the work of human hands, that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell." Now, why would Moses say that? Why would he say that they're going to ultimately serve these false gods in their exile? Because Christians, this is exactly what they had been doing. This was their sin. They were serving these gods. They were seeking after them with all that they had. And so if they loved that sin so much, God was going to hand them over to that sin. They would become the means of their own judgment. God would punish the sin with itself. Because ultimately, they were leading themselves into destruction, and God would bring that judgment that they justly deserved.

Because ultimately, Christians, idolatry is destructive. It will never lead us into good. We may think that it's going to help us. We may think that is going to lead to something good in the end. But does it really? Can it really? Let's take money again as an example. Maybe we think that with enough money all of our problems will go away. But how often has greed and the love of money torn families apart? Maybe we think that people will help us to get whatever we need. But how often do they turn around and betray us, stepping on us in an attempt to get something for themselves? Maybe we think that working endlessly will provide us with everything that we could ever possibly want. But how often does that work become a chore and a burden, and even have no benefit at all? Or we might think that entertainment will make us happy. But how often does it become boring and empty and unfulfilling? Christians, idols will destroy us. They will lead us into death and not into life. They can do nothing else. And to run after an idol is like chasing after the wind, and if that's what were going to go after, we will get what we deserve.

But if idols cannot help us, Christians, God can. God cannot fail us. And those that turn from dead idols of this world to the true and living God will find the answer to all of their problems. They will find the satisfaction that they seek. Money only causes problems, but God can solve them and give us true satisfaction. People will turn against us and betray us, but God is our faithful friend who will never leave us or forsake us. Work is a burden and a chore, but to serve God is perfect freedom. And entertainment is stale and unsatisfying, but God can satisfy all of our deepest desires. In fact, those who seek after him will desire no more. Because as Moses says, verse 31: "The Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them."

Therefore, Christians, turn away from idols. They are empty. They cannot help you. Even if they promise to give you everything, they will fail you in the end. Turn rather to the true and living God, because he can help you. He will help you. He will answer you. He will do what he says he will do. Because he alone is God. He alone is the Lord, and he has promised to help all those who call on him through faith in Jesus Christ, his Son.

Let us pray. Almighty and ever-living God, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, cast down every idol and reign supreme in our hearts, because you alone are Lord over all. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.