

BEWARE POOR SUBSTITUTIONS

By Chris Smith

SCRIPTURE

Exodus 20:4-6

Do not make an idol for yourself, whether in the shape of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. You must not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the fathers' sin, to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing faithful love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commands.

OBSERVATION

“Anything at all can become an idol once it becomes a substitute for God in our lives.”
—Author and Pastor Kyle Idleman in his book *Gods at War*

I often think about the Israelites in the Old Testament when they left Egypt and all the miraculous things that happened to them: the plagues that got them out, the Red Sea parted and walking across on dry land, pillars of cloud and fire, and manna to feed thousands daily. Then, they reached Mount Sinai, and Moses went up to receive a word from God, and when he was gone for too long, the masses told Aaron to make them a golden calf to go before them. God had been protecting them all along the way, then when Moses left, they wanted a golden calf to protect them?! In my brain, that just doesn't compute—you just saw all these miraculous things, how could you worship a golden calf as a god?

And how incredible that the first two things on the list from the tablet Moses brought down from the mountain directly related to what they were doing? God says in Exodus 20:4-6, “You shall not make for yourself an image ... You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.” Did they just not know any better? Before God wrote the commandments down on stone, did someone show them an idol and say, “This is as good as the almighty God”? What led them to believe that this idol would be able to “go before them” and protect them? If you look at Exodus 7:8-13, there were magicians, who were able to do the same signs that Moses and Aaron did for Pharaoh, when his staff turned to a snake, then again in Exodus 7:20-22, when the Nile turned to blood. There must have been something competing with the Israelites’

minds to take their focus off the one true God. In His sovereignty, God knew that the Israelites, like all humans, would struggle with making substitutes for the one true God. This is why these verses are so important for us to not simply gloss over.

All of these things together give me pause, and make me think—what am I missing? I mean, the Israelites saw the power of God, directly and in person, and yet chose to cast all their gold into a furnace and craft an idol. Something, somewhere, somehow, told them that this was a powerful thing, more powerful even than the God who had just delivered them from bondage. So, what today is competing for my mind in the world in which I live? Some of the things I work with often seem magical. Artificial Intelligence is making decisions for us—it's driving cars around town and picking our faces out of a crowd. Robotics are running entire factories and warehouses, policing the streets, and even saving lives, and this is just a few of those things. These things are new and seem powerful, and it's easy to see how some people might turn to these things and say they are more powerful than God. This type of thinking assumes God is too small. However, the Creator God of the universe is much bigger than any technological advancement. Idolatry is when we take the insignificant things of this world and put them on a pedestal, essentially saying that these things replace something that only He can give. The reality is that none of this compares to Him. Keep it all in perspective, and keep Him at the center of your life and be on the other side of that promise—where He “shows love to a thousand generations who love Me and keep My commandments.”

OBEDIENCE

As our world starts to come out of the COVID coma, the weeks of being at home, things being shut down, some in quarantine, others in isolation, maybe there's something that God has shown you that might have been competing for His spot in your heart. Take inventory and make sure you're not rushing back to an old idol that He has separated you from during this time. This week share with your Life Group some things that you have a tendency to put on a pedestal.

PRAYER

Use this passage from Exodus and James 1:17 to guide your prayer time today. James 1:17 says that “every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” Look to Him for everything and keep Him at the center. In your prayer time today, praise Him for being bigger than we can imagine, and thank Him for making Himself known to us.