

Irritant Idolatry

Are Our Problems Bigger Than God?

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Please turn with me to Exodus chapter 20, verse 3 where we find the first commandment.

Exodus 20:3 "You shall have no other gods before Me."

At first glance, the phrase "before Me" seems to indicate that other gods are fine as long as God is the primary one, but it does not mean that at all. The phrase "before Me" literally means "before My face." It means "against Me." This is the same Hebrew word used to describe Nimrod in Genesis 10, If you remember from last week, where it says that Nimrod "was a mighty hunter before the Lord." It means Nimrod was in opposition to God.

So in the first of the Ten Commandments we are told that any other gods, any other things that we worship or serve or emulate are going to be in opposition to the true God. God does not allow us to have anything else as the dominant focus of our lives.

Idolatry is a very broad topic, and we are all aware that there are many ways in which it can occur. One can break the first commandment through polytheism, where one worships a multitude of gods. Or a person can create a god in his own mind out of something material such as a car or a house. We know that idolatry can be extended even further to include placing too much emphasis on a career or a marriage or other human relationships. These things certainly are not wrong by themselves, but they can be taken to the point that God is pushed out of our worldview.

But there is another way that God can fade from our minds and be relegated to second place. This afternoon we are going to examine the subject of idolatry within a specific application. This application is a very subtle form of idolatry, and it is something that I have labeled as irritant idolatry. *Irritant idolatry is when we allow an irritating or offensive person, situation, or*

circumstance to occupy our vision to the point that God is squeezed out of the picture. And this is not Webster's definition, this is my own.

Within this context, I am using the word irritant to describe anything that evokes a negative reaction. It may be a minor weak reaction or it may be a very strong one that makes us see red. The reaction may be a carnal one, or it may be one of truly righteous indignation. There is a wide range here, but the common element is that it is a reaction caused by something that is contrary to our perspective.

I think you will agree with me that this world has many things that are irritating and which offend our sensibilities. Radio and television personalities that get our blood pressure up. There are actors and actresses, movies and television shows that irritate us to no end. There are politicians and civil servants, laws and regulations, political ideologies and movements which may be the epitome of insanity and ridiculousness to us.

Aside from these somewhat trivial matters, there are other issues that may strike a little closer to home. There may be a situation within our own physical family that gives us no end of grief, or there may be a situation within our spiritual family, the church, that we just cannot get over. The irritation may stem from a difficult person or perhaps a shortcoming of an individual or a group or may be a trend or an attitude that falls short of the glory of God. And because of the measure of the Holy Spirit within us, there are things that are contrary to God's Kingdom that grate on us, and at times may infuriate us.

God's Spirit and the spirit of the world are diametrically opposed, and our hearts and minds are frequently the battlegrounds. Our judgment, our comparison of this situation with regards to God's law may indeed be correct. But there comes a point when these things take up so much of our focus that we lose sight of God. These situations, these irritants become idolatry when we see them more clearly than we see God, or when we begin responding to them more than we are responding to God.

Please turn with me to the book of Jonah, chapter 3. We will be reading a significant portion of chapters 3 and 4, and as we go through this, consider Jonah's reaction. Look at how his assessment of the situation was so different

from God's. This is after God had already told Jonah to go to Nineveh once, and Jonah tried to run away, and God had to ever-so-gently convince Jonah that he was going the wrong way.

Jonah 3:1-5 Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh is an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them.

Jonah 3:10 Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented [God changed His mind.] from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.

Jonah 4:1-3 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. So he prayed to the Lord, and said, "Ah, Lord, was this not what I said when I was still in my own country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!"

Jonah 4:8-9 And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on the Jonah's head, to that he grew faint. Then wished death for himself, and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." Then God said to Jonah, Is it right for you to be angry about the plant? And he said, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!"

After God finally convinced Jonah to do the job that God had given him to do, Jonah preached to the Ninevites and told them that their city would be destroyed. In chapter 1, verse 2, it says that Jonah was given this task

because of the wickedness of the city. So Jonah finally gave them their warning as God had instructed them. Then he went out of the city and sat down and waited for the destruction of the city.

But notice his reaction when God did not destroy the city. Jonah 4:1 says that it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry. It appears he had the grown up equivalent of a temper tantrum because things did not turn out the way he thought they would or the way he thought that they should. He was angry at the salvation that God was working out for the city.

This is an interesting example because Jonah knew ahead of time what God thought about Nineveh and what God was planning to do. God does not speak to us in the same way that he spoke to the Old Testament prophets. So when we are evaluating a situation, we do not have the same assurances that Jonah had. God typically does not tell us to go tell another person that they are wicked and they are going to be destroyed in 40 days. But Jonah knew at least that part of God's will ahead of time. He knew that the Judge of the universe had judged that Nineveh was wicked and should be thrown down. Even though Jonah heard directly from God, God still was not at the center of Jonah's view. There were many other issues and other concerns that were greater and more important to him than what God was working out.

At the beginning of the book, Jonah was more interested in running away from God's work than submitting to it. Even after he grudgingly obeyed, he threw a fit because God did not deal with the people of Nineveh the way he, the way Jonah thought that God should. Three times Jonah concluded that he would rather die if he could not have his own way. His own view and outlook was more real to him than God's perspective and what God was working out. Jonah, a mere mortal, was not in a position to see all that God could see, and yet Jonah still deemed his own judgment to be more correct than God's. He focused more on the situation with Nineveh and later with the little plant than he did on God and God's sovereign will. And thus he committed this subtle form of idolatry.

This does not mean that we should simply wink at sin or become tolerant to the point of moral relativism, or it does not matter what anybody does. Moral relativism is very convenient because in saying whatever anyone wants to do is okay, it is just a step away from saying whatever I want to do is okay. Sins

should be upsetting to us, our own sin more than someone else's sins. But it is whether or not God remains squarely in the middle of our view that determines whether or not we are committing idolatry on the one hand or excusing sin on the other.

Please turn with me to the book of Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 9:4 And the Lord said to him [which is the angel], "Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it."

The ones that God spares are the ones that are sighing and crying because of the abominations. They are neither winking at the sins of the people nor trying to personally correct them. They clearly saw the sins against God, and it was upsetting to them, but it did not cloud their vision. They waited for God to act.

To understand the context, we would have to go back to Ezekiel chapter 8, which we will not do at this point. But just to summarize, the abomination that God was incensed about and that the righteous were sighing and crying about was idolatry. Chapter 8 contains four different visions that God gave to Ezekiel of idolatry, and each one God calls an abomination. The people were focused on things other than the true God, and the righteous ones in the city recognized this.

Ezekiel 9:8-9 So it was, that while they were killing them, I was left alone; and I fell on my face and cried out, and said, " Ah, Lord God! Will you destroy all the remnant of Israel in pouring out Your fury on Jerusalem?" [And notice God's response.] Then He said to me, "The iniquity of the house of Israel and Judah is exceeding great, and the land is full of bloodshed, and the city full of perversity; for they say [the people say], 'The Lord has forsaken the land, and the Lord does not see!'

They may not say it directly, but it is evident that these residents of the house of Israel and Judah did not have God as the center of their focus. If they did, they would have known that God has not forsaken the earth [land], as they

say in verse 9, and that He sees more and He is more aware of what is going on than any human being.

This principle is especially relevant with matters concerning our spiritual family. At the very core of our faith are the facts that God is sovereign and that Jesus Christ is the Head of the church. We know that salvation is by grace through faith, that God has to bring it about within other people just as He is bringing it about within us. In our view, do we know better how to bring someone to salvation than God does?

This is not to say human action should never be taken. If we believe someone has sinned against us personally, we have Matthew 18 as a general guide. When there are obvious and blatant and unrepentant problems like those of the Corinthian church, action should be taken by those in a position to do so. But underlying these decisions must be a clear view of God and His will, and any action must be taken with humility. The Father and the Son see all that is going on, and They act when it is according to Their will and when the time is right.

We may not see all that They are doing, and at times we may feel that God is not aware of things within His own church, and we have to point them out. Then when we take a step back, consider that logically, we know that is untrue and even dangerous. The church is the apple of His eye and He is very concerned about what happens within it. We should not take an apparent, and I will emphasize apparent, lack of action on His part as either a lack of progress toward His goal or a lack of caring. Like Jonah, we simply do not have the vantage point that God does.

Our Christian walk is the means by which God forms us into His image, and what God is most interested in is how we handle the relationships within our life: our relationship with Him, and our relationship with our neighbor. Because relationships are such a pivotal point, they are often the areas of our life that cause the biggest trials. These are the areas that can be the biggest irritants to us and evoke the strongest reactions.

Every time there is friction, every time there is an irritant, large or small, there is the potential for our human nature to rise up and for God to be pushed into the background. This is not idolatry in the sense of worship, but

it is idolatry in terms of letting something become larger and more real than God.