

July 24, 2005



Lesser Gods

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

Exodus 20:1-6

And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; 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 upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments."

The village of Caesarea Philippi is an important place in the history of the Christian faith.

The village of Caesarea Philippi was the place where Jesus first asked the question, "*Who do men say that I am?*"

The village of Caesarea Philippi was the place where Peter answered that question, saying to Jesus, "You are the Christ."

The village of Caesarea Philippi was the place where the Great Confession was first made. You can read all about it in St. Mark, chapter 8, verses 27-30.

And so, for the Christian, the village of Caesarea Philippi is a really important place because that is where the earthly Jesus was first identified as the long-awaited messiah. It was there that he was first called the Christ.

But the village of Caesarea Philippi was an important place in religious history long before Peter's great confession.

But, it's time to bring them out of the dark cave of yesterday,
 -out into the light of day.

It's time to admit that they still exist.

It's time to take a look at them and acknowledge how much power
 they still hold in your life,

- how much influence they exert over your decisions.

Maybe it's even time for you to break free from those
 lesser gods.

Oh, yes, you might think that you're

-- too smart,

- too sophisticated,

- too modern,

- to be tricked into believing in lesser gods.

You might think their day has passed.

That they're just ancient superstition.

While those lesser gods were around back in Bible days,

- you think they're not around any more.

Lesser gods sure were around in Bible days. Today's scripture
 passage is one you should know. It's the beginning of the Ten
 Commandments, and it's all about lesser gods.

It happened this way. When Moses brought the Ten Commandments
 down from the mountain-top, he had to deal with a bunch of people who
 believed, absolutely, in lesser gods. That's why the first two of those ten
 commandments had to do with lesser gods.

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me," was the first
 commandment, and the God Moses called Yahweh wanted his people to
 worship Yahweh first. He wanted them to know that no other god was as
 important as Yahweh.

"Thou shalt not make any graven images," was the second
 commandment, and Yahweh said there could be no statues and no pictures
 to worship. God said nothing made by human hands was worthy of
 worship.

The reason the Lord God Yahweh included this second
 commandment was because all the lesser gods were made into statues and
 objects of devotion. The people prayed to their little gods regularly.
 The people lit candles and sacrificial fires to them. The people carried their

miniature god statues around with them. I imagine some really devout people tied a statue of their favorite god to the windshield of their chariots, or buried one of their god statues in their flower garden if they were trying to sell their house, or kept one on their bedside table.

And in reaction to all of those lesser god statues, the God of Moses said, “No!” - no statues, no pictures, no medals, nothing!

Back then, when Moses was around, lesser gods were everywhere. Everyone knew about all those lesser gods, and almost everyone worshipped at least some of them. Moses and Yahweh knew it was important to tell the people to stay away from those lesser gods.

It was important then, and it’s important today.

It’s been more than four thousand years since Moses came down from the mountain-top and delivered Yahweh’s top Ten Commandments, and not much has changed. Back when those top Ten Commandments were new, lesser gods were so important that they took up the first two commandments. In those four thousand years since then, not much has changed. Because, the life of faith remains a struggle not to worship at the altar of lesser gods.

Whether you admit it or not, you are still surrounded by lesser gods. They still prowl the earth, on the look-out for lazy Christians and other folk, who are easy prey for their enticing brand of religion.

I’m going to talk about some specific lesser gods in just a minute; but first, I want to refresh your memory of what a god is. Your god is whatever your heart clings to. Whatever is absolutely central to you, whatever you value above everything else, whatever symbol controls your life - that is your god.

I hope your heart clings to Jesus Christ, making him the focus of your thinking, placing value in him above everything else. But maybe, some lesser gods have intruded into your life when you weren’t paying attention.

Maybe you were busily doing something else, and you didn’t even notice that the lesser god, Pluton, set up a shrine in your soul. Many of you worship Pluton, and you don’t even know it.

Pluton is the god of wealth and the patron saint of materialism.

Every time you buy a lottery ticket, every time you place a bet on a horse, every time you fly off to Los Vegas; it's Pluton you're worshipping. And, I'm right there with you!

It's so common, you could almost call it human nature. Almost every person, every man, woman, and child, would like to have more money.

But there are times when it goes beyond human nature, and becomes an obsession, a compulsion, a need. When you pull out the charge card because you have to "keep up with the Jones'," when you scour the business pages fretting about making the "right investment," when you concentrate your hours and your wealth accumulating a "stock portfolio," when all of that seems like a virtue to you -

- when it's what you think about,

- and plan around,

- and save for -

- you are worshipping Pluton.

You know it's still true today: money is still one of the lesser gods. So many good Christians still worship money.

For some people, the lesser god, Vesta, has taken center stage. Vesta was the ancient Roman goddess of the hearth, the city, and the state.

The fourth of July always fills me with pride and joy at being an American, but there can be a lesser god lurking behind the flag, too.

Vesta calls you to follow your nation blindly, to ignore all its faults, to march in lock-step behind your leaders, never thinking of what might work better. It's a dangerous lesser god.

Those of you who are old enough can remember the trials of war criminals which followed the end of World War II. Almost all of the former Nazis who were tried gave the same rational for their actions. "I was just following orders," they said. They followed their leaders and didn't question a thing. That can only happen when you're an acolyte to a lesser god.

And when it comes to pleasure, many Americans find their best friends in these lesser gods. Many people pay regular homage to Bacchus, the god of wine and revelry. From street-corner wino to closet-drinking middle-class housewife, thousands of people bow down to Bacchus.

And many others flock to the altar of Eros, the lesser god of sexual pleasure.

What about you? Have you ever worshipped some of those lesser gods?

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying it's a sin to use and enjoy any of these lesser things from time to time.

I'm a collector, and I want to keep adding to my collections.

I'm proud of my home, and I want to make it better.

I love my family, and I want them to love me back..

I want our nation to be strong and free.

I want to be successful and have a measure of comfort and wealth.

I think money can bring much good to a hurting world.

I don't think there is anything wrong with wanting
wealth,

or pleasure,

or a strong, free nation.

There's nothing wrong with any of those things -

- unless you let them take control of your thoughts,

- unless you become obsessed with them,

- unless they grab center stage -

- and become what you worship.

They're all part of life. They all move in and out of our thoughts. You could say, they're just human nature. Unfortunately, human nature has demonstrated an unlimited ability to take things which belong out there on the periphery of life and push them into the center where they become gods.

The Lord God told Moses, "Thou shalt not make for yourself a graven image..." But men and women have an uncanny ability - and desire - to make a graven image out of anything!

Some do it with their professions.

Some do it with their homes.

Some do it with money,

or knowledge,

or physical beauty.

People have the ability to take something that's good,

or at least, neutral;

something that belongs out there on the edge of importance,
 out there on the border-line of life -
 and they push it right into the middle.

They make it the most important thing.

They turn it into a lesser god.

They bow down in submission;

and without a question or a thought,

they do whatever that god calls them to do.

Yahweh commanded Moses: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”

You want to be faithful and true, but there are so many other gods calling your name, singing their sweet siren songs, enticing you to enter their temples, to drink from their honeyed waters, and taste their succulent fruit.

Those lesser gods call your name, telling you that -

medicine or science,

job or home,

hobbies or games,

wealth or carnal pleasure ,

strength or force -

telling you that any or all of those things -

those things that belong out there on the fringe of importance,

telling you that they alone will give you a sense of wholeness

and satisfaction,

that they will sustain you in hardship,

that they will bring meaning to your life.

And if you buy it, or give in to it, or bow down to it - some lesser thing is going to become your god.

Modern living still calls people to worship at the altar of lesser gods.

Moses came down from the mountain-top and he brought with him the Lord God’s top Ten Commandments. And right up front, at the very beginning, was the commandment to stay away from lesser gods.

How are you doing when it comes to these lesser gods?

I hope you have trained yourself to put the Lord God first. When God comes first, everything else finds its proper place. All those lesser gods will be under control: wealth, national pride, pleasure, profession,

homes, hobbies, habits. They will all be in their proper places, so long as God comes first.

But if you let one of those lesser gods take center stage in your life, it will demand more and more of you until you are consumed by it. Whenever you start relying on something less than God for salvation, or wholeness, or happiness, you're letting that lesser god take over.

Do not be deceived, these lesser gods are very jealous gods. They make greater and greater demands on your life. Once you bow down at their altars, they assume tremendous power. They can control your life. They can destroy you.

Much of what passes for religion these days, so much of modern-day spirituality is nothing more than selfishness dressed-up. The message that's proclaimed in many of the self-help books and from far too many pulpits boils down to one thing: how can this make me feel better? It's a danger to every person who wants to be a Christian. It's the most deceitful lesser god of all,

the call to feel good,
the temptation to be selfish,
the religion of "my, me, mine"!

But the one, true Lord God told Moses; and years later He spoke through Jesus Christ, and today He is telling you that the way to live involves looking away from your self,
and looking toward God,
to understand what He wants;
and then, looking out toward others,
and meeting their needs.

That is where true joy can be found.

Idolatry, the worship of lesser gods, is as much a problem in our time as it was in the time of Moses. Perhaps it is more a problem today because too many people fail to recognize these lesser gods.

I ask you to take a look at your life. Have you brought something to the very center of your life that really should be out there on the fringe? Remember: whatever controls your life is your god.

It all begins with what thoughts bubble up out of the soil of your soul. If you think of God and Jesus Christ first,
and seek to do their will,

you will keep all those lesser gods in their proper places.
And, the little stream of your life will become a mighty river -
of purpose,
of joy,
and of life-sustaining love.