

Noted atheist Richard Dawkins declared in his book, *The God Delusion*,

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully. (Stanley p. 2)

Dawkins harsh (and hard to pronounce) expression of the view of God as detailed in his reading of the Old Testament matches the view of some today who try to understand who God is by reading the Old Testament. It also matches some of the criticism that people raise about those who claim to speak for, or represent, God. Many outside the church would use Dawkins' words to likewise describe many Christians today. And when Christians live in a way that embodies this cruel picture of God we can understand why some would say they like Jesus, but not the church.

Dawkins understanding of God; and the sad characterizations that some have of Christians is not something new. For centuries those inside and outside the Christian community have tried to reconcile the differing images of God as seen in the Old and the New Testaments. Even Jesus' disciples, as seen in the interchange between Jesus and Philip from our Gospel lesson were uncertain who God was. That's why Jesus said to Philip, "*If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well.*" (v. 7)

And there is one more problem in trying to understand who God is. If Christians are supposed to reflect the image of God; which group of Christians are we going to look to for understanding the clear picture of God? Are the Fred Phelps-led, Westboro Baptist Church members in Topeka, Kansas the example? And if not them; then who? Who truly reflects the image of God?

No wonder the world has a hard time accepting God as a God of grace and love. Christians, Westboro Baptists and you and I included, have warped the image of God. In keeping with the Ten Commandments theme you could say that we've created a false idol.

Sadly, as Christians, our false images of God have so penetrated our culture that at times it becomes comical how individuals picture Jesus. This clip from the movie, *Talladega Nights*, gives us a glimpse as to how some people see Jesus.

Video Clip

Ricky Bobby's prayer is a lesson for all of us today in that we've created God in the image that we are comfortable with; an image often different from that seen in scripture and revealed through Jesus.

If you remember, last week I said that one of the reasons Moses began writing the first five books of the Old Testament was to reintroduce God to a people who had lost sight of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Sadly, we're in the same place today!

In today's culture we need to be reintroduced to God. Not only have Christians created, and in turn worshipped, a false image of God; but many today have no Christian memory, no Biblical literacy, on which to hang the concepts of who God is.

And what better way is there to be introduced or reintroduced to God than through Jesus. Not the Jesus we think we know. Not the Jesus we've heard about from others; but the Jesus who we meet personally and see revealed in the Gospels.

As one author notes, "We create a Jesus who simply affirms our many cultural blind spots and engenders dangerous bigotry." (In case you need a good example, think slavery.) And the author continues to drive his point home by saying that, "Ignorance of Jesus by those who claim his name is toxic to both the believer as well as those around him or her." (Hirsch, p. 34)

So herein is our problem. While we are quick to say that we love God; the God that we love is often the God we've created (or, idolized)-not the God who is revealed in scripture, the God revealed in Jesus. The God we love, the God we create, is instead a God whom we can manage and manipulate to meet our desires.

So how do the Ten Commandments speak to this whole idea of idolatry? Anyone want to take a shot at the first two commandments?

First commandment: You shall have no other gods before me.

Second commandment: You shall not make for yourself an idol.

These first two commandments eventually become expressed in the words of Deuteronomy 6:4-5, words spoken daily by every Jew (known as the *Shema*) and the words from which Jesus formed his answer (in Matthew 22:37) to the Pharisees when they asked him about the greatest commandment:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

What God was trying to get at in these first two commandments was very simple. First, I want to be your one and only God. There are a lot of gods out there vying for our attention. But this God is jealous. God doesn't want us losing focus on who it is who created us, gives us life, purpose and meaning. No god should ever rival the one true God in our heart and life.

If anything or anyone rivals God for first place in your heart and life then you've missed the importance of the first commandment. And when you think about that in the context of the *Shema* every aspect of life (heart, soul, mind and strength) should be committed to loving God. So God is not just a part of life, God encompasses all of life.

That means that how you live every moment of every day should express your love for God alone. You can't keep God in a box over here on Sunday and live apart from God Monday through Saturday. That misses the whole point of God's claim to be first in every aspect of our life.

So do you have any gods other than the One True God?

Now look at the second commandment, God was forbidding any attempt to create an image of God that could in some way be managed and manipulated.

Think about the events occurring while God was giving the Commandments to Moses up on the mountain. Down at the bottom of the mountain the people are milling around thinking that maybe this Moses has abandoned them and the God he purports to represent isn't for real. After all they can't see this God. So in Exodus 32 we see what happens.

The people go to Moses' brother Aaron and demand he fashion them a god to worship. Now, remember these are the same people who for 400 years have seen the Egyptians worshipping all forms of idols. So since they don't know any better they figure they need to make themselves a god. After all, having an extra idol laying around can't hurt!

Sadly, we've been following in their footsteps even since! We fashion idols out of gold and anything else so that we can have a god to suit our desire, a someone/thing that can make us feel good about ourselves and our choices.

But worst of all is when we fall prey to fashioning the God of scripture into an image that we can manage and manipulate. And sadly, we don't often realize that the god we worship isn't the God of the Bible; but merely a god we've fashioned to meet our 'cultural blindspots.'

And why don't we realize who this god is that we've created? Because, we fail to read and comprehend the whole word of God. We've fallen prey to proof-texting, picking a verse that supports our argument, while ignoring another passage. And we've failed to really dig into the truth of scripture instead just taking someone else's word for the truth. Read Acts 17 for an example of a group of Christians who didn't just take the preacher's word, but actually went back to read what the Word of God said.

Scot McKnight recently said this: "We need to be willing to let the Bible say what the Bible says and not make the Bible say what we want it to say." You need to read that a few times to absorb the meaning. And yet it's true; we often read into the Bible what we want it say, rather than allowing the word of God to speak out of the Bible and into our lives.

And here is the challenge: if we are going to stop putting God second in our lives and stop creating God in our image rather than our being created in God's image, then we need to be willing to read the word of God regularly and start making it apply to our lives.

And what better place is there to start than reading about the One who said, if you've seen me, you've seen the Father. So let me lay a challenge out to you this morning. Would you be willing to read the Gospel of John this week? That's 3 chapters a day for the next 7 days. And while you are reading just keep asking yourself what can I learn about Jesus in this passage? If you do that I think next week you'll have a new understanding of Jesus and what he reveals to us about God.

If we are going to experience the power of God in our lives and in our church then we need to commit to becoming more and more each day like the One we say we worship. That means laying aside our preconceived notions when we read a passage. That means learning how Jesus example informs our daily choices. That means asking ourselves truthfully, what would Jesus do? I think if we are honest we wouldn't be doing some of the things we do and saying some of the things we say if we start keeping the first two commandments.

I want to wrap things up today and give you something to think about that we're going to talk more fully about next week. And I think if you really listen it may challenge you to ask some questions about whether the God you are worshipping is the God of the Bible or merely the one you've created to agree with your position.

How many of you are Dancing with the Stars fans? Well a week ago the cast for the Fall line-up of celebrity dancers was announced. And as could be expected everyone is talking about the selection of Chaz Bono. Now if you've been under a rock you may not know the story about Chaz. Chaz is the child of Sonny and Cher. If you're as old as me you remember Chaz as little Chastity Bono, the daughter of Sonny and Cher.

Well over the last few years the story has been well-publicized about Chastity becoming Chaz, a man. So begins the controversy. And who gets out in front leading a protest about ABC's selection of a transgendered individual, the Christians! (Actually, I think it's funny that Christians are even commenting about how much they like the show and watch it with their children given the lack of clothing and suggestive dances that appear on this show each week.)

Here's the problem. Christians are running around bashing ABC and demeaning Chaz. Can you tell me where in the Bible it says that we're to hold non-Christians accountable for their lifestyle choices? (We are failing to hold ourselves as Christians accountable for our choices!) And where does it say that as Christians we're to demean and belittle anyone who is created in the image of God?

I know that I'm stepping on toes here but I think it sad when all Christians are known for today is what we are against. I think that the Jesus I read about in the Gospel would probably sit down and even eat a meal with Chaz. Why? Because, the Jesus I see in the Bible ate with the people that were called sinners and tax-collectors.

And who was it who yelled the loudest about Jesus' behavior? That's right, it was the Pharisees, the rule-keepers. The Pharisees had created a God who kept the 600+ laws and expected everyone else to follow in step. Is that the God we've taken to creating in today's culture; a God who expects people to keep all the rules or else you're not worth loving?

Come back next week as we talk about how Jesus stressed relationships before rules. And in case you're not sure about all this; check out some of the stories of Jesus you'll be reading this week in the Gospel of John.

SERMON OUTLINE

rethinking the Ten Commandments

Week 2

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 20:3-4; John 14:5-14

Who is this God?

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

-Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion

- What words would you use to describe God? What are the views of God that you hear others express about God?

When Jesus spoke these words to Philip, "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well." (John 14:7), what do you think Philip and the other disciples had failed to learn by watching Jesus?

Who are these Christians?

- What words do you hear others use to describe Christians?

Have you seen the protests of the Westboro Baptist Church? What image does this convey to others about Christians? How does it make you feel as a Christian?

Who is this Jesus?

- What is the image of Jesus that you are most comfortable with? Why?
- What image, if any, do most of your friends have of Jesus?

"We create a Jesus who simply affirms our many cultural blind spots and engenders dangerous bigotry." (In case you need a good example, think slavery.) And the author continues to drive his point home by saying that, "Ignorance of Jesus by those who claim his name is toxic to both the believer as well as those around him or her." –Allen Hirsch

- What are some other examples, past or present, where Christians have used the Bible or Jesus to justify something that is not biblical?

The Problem

So herein is our problem. While we are quick to say that we love God; the God that we love is often the God we've created (or, idolized)-not the God who is revealed in scripture, the God revealed in Jesus. The God we love, the God we create, is instead a God whom we can manage and manipulate to meet our desires.

- Why do we want a god that we can 'manage and manipulate'?

The First Two Commandments

1.

2.

The Shema - Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. Deuteronomy 6:4-5

- What rivals have we placed before God in our heart and life?

The Golden Calf

Exodus 32:1-6

- How do we follow in the footsteps of the people of God when it comes to making a god we can manage and manipulate?

Re-Creating God

- Do you search out the answers to your questions in the Bible? Or just ask a friend?

What can you learn from the example of the Christians in Berea? Read Acts 17:11

How do you react to what Scot McKnight says below?

“We need to be willing to let the Bible say what the Bible says and not make the Bible say what we want it to say.” Scot McKnight

Putting it into Practice

The Challenge – Read the Gospel of John this week.

What am I learning about Jesus in this passage?

What contemporary examples do we have of people creating God in a way that is contrary to the image of God we find in the Bible?

Next Week: Relationships Before Rules Matthew 9:9-13 Genesis 12:1-3