

WHY DOES GOD HAVE TO BE NUMBER ONE?

**By Paul Penno Jr.
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Iraqi security forces managed to set free a young woman. The girl was found and freed from her kidnappers, who were hiding her inside the trunk of their automobile, when they were stopped at a checkpoint on a street. The kidnappers tried to open fire on the soldiers but security forces seriously wounded two of them. The young girl was surely set free from a long enslavement to her captors.

What a grand thing it is to know that God is a holy God and that He has power to save. This is the sum of the whole matter: "I am the Lord thy God that brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Ex. 20:1. But some will say, "We have not been brought out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Then it is time you were. Do not deceive yourselves with the thought, "We were never in bondage to any man;" for "whoso committeth sin is the servant of sin." One of the names of Egypt, the name which the Lord gave it, is Rahab; which means pride, boastfulness. See Isa. 30:7, R. V. Egypt is a synonym for self-exaltation and defiance of God. The king of Egypt said: "Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice? I know not the Lord." Ex. 5:2. God makes Himself known to us when we are in the bondage of sin, and delivers us that we may serve Him. We cannot

serve Him while we are the servants of sin. "We cannot serve God and Mammon."

When God brings us out of bondage, we find that the commandment which we thought was a grievous yoke is liberty itself. So far is it from being a yoke of bondage that only free people can keep it. It gives freedom; "for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death." Rom. 8:2. Those who seek His precepts are sure to walk at liberty. And so the commandment, instead of being an arbitrary rule, is a glorious promise. Instead of telling us merely what we must or must not do, it gives to us and makes sure to us all the holiness that it would have us render. The power by which Rahab (Egypt) was broken (Isa. 51:9-11), and all the enemies of the Lord scattered, casts out from us all strange gods.

Imagine the following scene: Mike and Elizabeth have dated several times. You can tell by the look in their eyes that they enjoy being together. In fact, they have just returned from a delightful day together. First some playful tennis, then dinner, then a concert. Everything has been perfect. Elizabeth hasn't had such a good time with any of the other fellows she has dated.

Now as Mike walks her from the car to her living room, he pauses, looks into her eyes and says, "I have a command for you. From now on, you shall have no other boyfriends besides me. You will love me and me only. You will date me and me only. Do you understand?"

How do you think this would set with Elizabeth? The tone just doesn't seem right, does it?

Something about us doesn't respond very well to commands and demands—especially when it comes to love.

Well, God's commandments are not demands from a controlling person. They are his loving promises.

We find that God, who delivers from bondage, says: "If thou wilt hearken unto Me, there shall no strange god be in thee, neither shalt thou worship any strange God." Ps. 81:9. We listen to Him, and we are free, and henceforth sin shall have no dominion over us. All other gods have held us in the most degrading bondage; they have made us to be hateful and unlovely. But God, who is altogether lovely, makes us free as Himself, that we may worship Him in the beauty of holiness. Then He says, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me," and we delight in the assurance, for we know that He means, I am thy God and I have called thee by name; thou art Mine; henceforth I will defend you from every false god; I will be responsible for your freedom, so long as you listen to My words. I will protect you from the roaring lion, and from the sin that croucheth at the door. Nothing shall by any means hurt you; I will care for My own, and save you from the fury of the oppressor. And we in turn will say, "God is our Refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble." Ps. 46:1. "Behold God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid; for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; He also is become my salvation." Is. 12:2.

A few years after a couple became Christians they felt that God wanted them to cleanse their home

from anything unclean. Shortly after they had burned hundreds and hundreds of dollars of ungodly secular movies, music, books, and video games, he received a call from the cable company and they talked him into receiving cable TV with HBO and multitudes of other channels for three months free of charge. He thought to himself what do I have to lose? It is free for three months and I would only watch clean movies. After receiving this cable box they would many times scan all the stations to see what was on only to find there was barely any clean family movies, but mostly all movies that you would class with a list of abominations in them. A short time later things at home began going very badly. He became very depressed, a member in his family became very sick, and he lost a beloved pet through a horrible sickness. He is not normally a person who stays depressed, so he began seeking God why these things were happening. He felt that he strongly put in my spirit that it was because he had allowed the "accursed thing" into his home. After removing this cable box from the TV and asking God's forgiveness, things quickly got back to normal.

Another form of violation of the first commandment is brought to view by Paul in 2 Cor. 4:3, 4: "If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost; in whom *the god of this world* hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them." Between the children of this world and the children of God there is no connection. Between those who love God, and those who love

this world there is no affinity. “Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.” James 4:4.

Yet to please the world, to gain the favor of the world, and to be a friend of the world, is that for which men seek more than for the grace of God. Men will destroy their own souls if only they can stand well with the world. They will annihilate character to acquire and maintain a reputation. Reputation is of the world, character is of God. When men are called to obey God, the love of the world stands in the way, and the god of this world blinds their minds lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ should shine unto them. It is the work of the gospel to open men’s eyes, to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. Darkness covers the earth, and gross darkness the people; Satan and his hosts are “the rulers of the darkness of this world” (Eph. 6:12), for the whole world lieth in the wicked one. Christ called Satan “the prince of this world” (John 12:31), and as He came to save us from this present evil world, the message of his salvation is to turn men from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive the forgiveness of sins and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith in Jesus.

Hideyoshi, a Japanese warlord who ruled over Japan in the late 1500’s, commissioned a colossal statue of Buddha for a shrine in Kyoto. It took 50,000 men five years to build, but the work had scarcely been completed when the earthquake of 1596 brought the roof of the shrine crashing down

and wrecked the statue. In a rage Hideyoshi shot an arrow at the fallen colossus. “I put you here at great expense,” he shouted, “and you can’t even look after your own temple.”

We are a society which worships many gods, among them Mars, the god of national security and power; Mammon, the god of wealth; Prometheus, the god of autonomous science and technology; Dionysos, the god of self-indulgence and excess; Eros, the god of sexuality; and, of course, Ego, the little god which is myself.

It is for this cause that the friendship of the world is enmity with God. Satan is the prince, the god, of this world, and to love the world is to love the rule and dominion of Satan. To be a friend of the world is to be a friend of Satan. Therefore it is that if any one loves the world the love of the Father is not in him. 1 John 2:15. There is no affinity between Satan and God. Satan rebelled against God, led our first parents into sin, gained possession of the world, and has kept it in rebellion against God ever since. “Therefore says the Lord, “Be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God.” Rom. 12:2.

Yet for all this, how many there are of the professed children of God, who, instead of being transformed to the will of God, seek to be conformed to this world, and allow their minds to run in the same old worldly channel that they did before they named the name of Christ. All the capricious behests of fashion are obeyed more

readily, and more willingly, than are the commands of God; all her follies and foibles are conformed to as though that were itself the way of salvation. It is readily followed by thousands of those who profess to be followers of God. Whoever will do a thing because it is popular or fashionable to do so, will do anything, it matters not what, that may become popular or fashionable. To please the world is their aim, and please it they will. The world is their god, and the Lord must take second place. But when he is given the second place he is given no place, for he will be supreme or not at all. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," "I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me" (Lev. 10:3), and "my glory will I not give to another." Is. 42:8.

A friend of Frank's from college days was an outstanding and gifted young preacher. But he was constantly being pulled by the world. He would often brag about his exploits in "the good old days." Finally he left the ministry and went back into the world. Thank God, his story doesn't end there. One day years later, Eric called Frank and said, "Frank, I'm back with Jesus now. I went back to the old days and discovered that what I had in Jesus was much better." What was so sad however, Eric wasted so many years of his life living in the world. He still bears scars from his days in the world.

The separating from this world, and turning from the power of Satan unto God must be a total transfer of allegiance from one Government to another, from one sovereign to another. By this transfer we become citizens of God's kingdom, and "our citizenship is in Heaven, from whence also we

look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body." Whereas "in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2), remember "that at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world." Eph. 2:12. But "now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone." Eph. 2:19, 20.

If a child is born abroad to American parents, the infant may acquire not only U. S. citizenship but also that of the country of birth. By the same token, a child born to foreign parents in the United States may hold both U. S. citizenship and that of the parents.

Now in the affairs of the Governments of this world, when a person transfers his allegiance from one to another, he takes an oath of allegiance and fidelity.

So likewise we, in becoming fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God, and in transferring our citizenship to Heaven, and our allegiance to God, must renounce forever all allegiance and fidelity to any other prince, potentate, sovereignty, or god whatsoever, and particularly to the god of this world. This must be

done or our citizenship can never be registered in Heaven. It must be maintained or our citizenship, once registered there, will be blotted out and we treated as the traitors which such a relapse surely shows us to be. By the word of God the separation is clear-cut: "If the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." 1 Kings 18:21. There can be no compromise, there can be no playing fast and loose. If the Lord be God, follow him; but if the world, then follow it. You can't be a citizen of two countries at once; you can't serve God and this world both at once.

The first commandment seems to many to be the hardest to obey! It says, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3). But now let's see how it becomes Good News: "Other gods before" the Lord can be anything (or anybody!) that captures our heart's devotion in place of devotion to Him. We may smile at the ancient Israelites' constant temptation to worship those silly, grotesque "idols" of wood or stone, or even of gold or silver. How could they be so dumb?

The problem was that they imagined that those useless things could substitute for God and bring them happiness, so in their minds the idols assumed an aura of "sacredness." Isaiah describes how foolish they were: "The workman molds an image, the goldsmith overspreads it with gold, and the silversmith casts silver chains." "He burns half of it in the fire; ... he even warms himself, ... and the rest of it he makes into a god, ... He falls down before it and worships it, prays to it and says, 'Deliver me!'" (Isaiah 40:19; 44:16, 17). How silly!

But we imagine that our modern "gods" can substitute for God. They will make us happy: a new car; a new dress; a new house; a million dollars in the bank; some woman or some man whom the Lord has not given us ("can't live without him/her!"); major sports; a selfish career. There's no end to our "gods." Everybody has his/her particular temptation of "other gods before Me."

But all idolatry leaves us feeling bitter and cheated, because like ancient Israel's handmade idols, each "god" turns to ashes in our hands. "But the allurements are so intense!

We have seen that, for any one to have this world, or anything that is of this world, is to have another god before the Lord. And this other god is "the god of this world," the "spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience," which is Satan.

In *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen retells a tale from ancient India: Four royal brothers decided each to master a special ability. Time went by, and the brothers met to reveal what they had learned.

"I have mastered a science," said the first, "by which I can take but a bone of some creature and create the flesh that goes with it."

"I," said the second, "know how to grow that creature's skin and hair if there is flesh on its bones."

The third said, "I am able to create its limbs if I have flesh, the skin, and the hair."

"And I," concluded the fourth, "know how to give life to that creature if its form is complete."

Thereupon the brothers went into the jungle to find a bone so they could demonstrate their specialties.

As fate would have it, the bone they found was a lion's. One added flesh to the bone, the second grew hide and hair, the third completed it with matching limbs, and the fourth gave the lion life.

Shaking its mane, the ferocious beast arose and jumped on his creators. He killed them all and vanished contentedly into the jungle.

We too have the capacity to create what can devour us. Goals and dreams can consume us. Possessions and property can turn and destroy us—unless we first seek God's kingdom and righteousness, and allow Him to breathe into what we make of life.

But Christ came to "bring us to God." And this is the whole work of the preaching of the gospel. Now "the world" is divided into three parts—"the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life." 1 John 2:16. And under one or all of these three heads is idolatry manifested.

First: "the lust of the flesh"—appetite, or intemperance. This is specifically defined as a god. Temperance is self-control,—not merely the control of one particular part of the man, self-control in one particular thing,—it is the control of self, the very being, the whole man. But this can never be done by the man himself; for the man himself is already subject to the control of "the god of this world," the evil one. This control was gained by the evil one, in the garden, and *through appetite*, this very "lust of the flesh." Since man is thus the subject of "the god of this world," a slave, "sold under sin," it is impossible for him of himself to clear himself of that power to which he surrendered himself.

But there is deliverance by *the power of God*, the true God, the living God, the rightful God of man. God can set free every man, from all the power of "the god of this world;" and it is *only thus* that any man can ever gain control of *himself*. It is only thus that any man can attain to true self-control, to true temperance.

Yet another phase of the worship of "the god of this world," included in "the pride of life," is the worship of Mammon, or riches. For is it not written, "The love of money is the root of all evil"?

This is so wrapped up with that phase of "the pride of life,"—ambition, self-exaltation, self aggrandizement,—that it is, in great measure, inseparable from it. For there is nothing that gives worldly glory so quickly, so easily, and so abundantly as money; and there is nothing that gives power so quickly and so easily as does money. All this, simply because Mammon is such a familiar deity to mankind, because mankind is naturally so worshipful of Mammon. And yet it is all idolatry; it is all a denial of the true God; it is a breaking of the First Commandment, which says, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." For, says Jesus: "Ye can not,"—not, Ye ought not; not, Ye should not; but,—"*Ye can not* serve God and Mammon."

The third of the three forms under which "the world" is embraced, and idolatry manifested, is—"The pride of life."

And when, in this same "pride of life," this spirit of ambition, the disciples were striving among themselves as to who should be the greatest, or

who should be counted the greatest, “Jesus called them unto Him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles *exercise dominion over them*, and they that are great *exercise authority upon them*. But *it shall not be so among you*: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister.” Matt. 20:25-28.

Thus, all desire for place or for position; all exercise of dominion or of authority *in* place or position; all national distinctions, all racial distinctions, all aristocratic distinctions, all class distinctions, all place or official distinctions, are only of the pride of life, are not of the Father, but of the world, and are idolatry. They are all vanity, which is only idolatry.

How can we overcome our infatuation?” Here’s the good news: when we understand and appreciate what the Son of God has done for us, all this modern idolatry loses its charm. It’s not the gold or silver or wooden crosses in churches that captivate our souls; it’s the understanding of the love of Christ that is revealed at His cross. In the light of that cross of Christ, our beloved “idol” turn into “ashes” even before we worship it! All the glitter that once attracted us has lost its sheen and we actually begin to “glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I unto the world” (Galatians 6:14).

You may just now be wrestling with some almost overmastering temptation to put some thing you don’t really need, or some person outside your marriage, to be an idol, the object of your heart’s devotion in place of your true Savior.

Before you are tempted to sacrifice your soul, God shows you a glimpse of how wonderful heaven is. Before you snatch at some earthly riches, He reveals to you the true wealth of His salvation “in Christ.” Before you worship some earthly “idol,” He shows you how precious is His eternal friendship.

The keeping of this first commandment is the necessary preparation for the coming of the Lord. “We know that when He shall appear, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as He is pure.” 1 John 3:3. We shall then see Him as He is, because we shall have already been changed into His image by holding Him. Therefore to this end the message is proclaimed, “Behold your God!” Is. 35:4. No other God is to intervene to shut off the view. Because the hour of His Judgment is come, we are to “fear God, and give glory to Him” “and worship Him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.” Rev. 14:7. This is nothing more than the repetition of the first commandment. We are to know Him only, and Christ came to declare Him. The commandment is life everlasting (John 12:50), and it is eternal life to know God. John 17:3. Those who know Him will put their trust in Him, and when He appears will say, “Lo, this is our God.” Is. 25:9.

On a trip from college to New Orleans Candice and I were in a car with her friend. It was late at night. I had been driving, but became drowsy and knew that I had to turn the driving over to the car’s owner. But I was concerned about her because she could be all over the road. I jumped into the back

seat and decided to go to sleep. I said to myself, I believe Jesus is with us and will take care of us. Yes, Jesus is coming here to take care of us.

Sure enough, I was awakened by a sudden jolt. She had had an accident. Her car was smashed up, but still drivable. Jesus had come and protected us. Candice received a broken rib which later healed. I know that Jesus comes in the ordinary, common things of our lives. He is coming again to take us out of this world to be with Him in His Father's house. Do you and I love the thought of Jesus' second coming?