

Dear Friends in Christ,

Who do we worship? That's the concern of the first commandment. And who or what we worship will shape our faith and our life. So it goes without saying that our church elders want everyone to have a vibrant faith and to live in the confidence and comfort of our salvation by clinging to and depending fully on God. I want that for myself and I hope you do as well. We all need to keep growing in our walk with God. As we have been challenged to renewal or spiritual growth, the goal is for our church to be filled with better disciples of Jesus, people who understand what it means for God to have first place in our lives so that we love and worship the Lord God above all else. This is so important.

Acts 2 gives us a beautiful picture of a healthy church where the people of God are striving to be better disciples. The people sought the Lord, sought to put him first, sought to get closer to Jesus. And the Lord added to their number. Jesus filled the pews, you might say.

If it were only about full pews, we could argue that our society can fill "the pews" of all sorts of different venues. We can fill Rogers Place with 25,000 Oilers fans eager to see McDavid do his magic. We can pack out the Commonwealth Stadium with 60,000 people for an Eskimos game where they hopefully trample the Roughriders. Some of you have seen Commonwealth full for a U-2 concert a few years ago or maybe Pink Floyd back in the 1990s. And many, many other times. All of that can be wonderful, enjoyable and fun.

So filling the pews is something that can be done with human planning and hard work. In contrast, the church is interested in forming disciples of Jesus who draw near to him in worship, who come together in fellowship and who offer our lives in the service of Jesus. The catechism says that *idolatry is having or inventing something in which one trusts* (you could say worships) *in place of or alongside of the one true God...* In other words, we want to help every disciple of Jesus to be putting him first in our lives.

The Gospel, Not Rules

Before I say more, I want to be clear that Christianity is not about rules. Lots of people feel like the church wants to tell us what to do—how to live. And while that may be important, that's not the primary calling of the church. Always, our faith and therefore the church is not about "what to do" but about announcing the good news that "It is done." Do you get that? Our job isn't first of all about telling people what to do. It's sharing the good news that Jesus has done it all for us. Christ has finished the work of saving us. So, when we give people rules to follow instead of preaching to them the gospel of grace, then we're not helping them follow Jesus. We all need to get that straight. Rules don't save us. Only Jesus does. Yet the Lord gives us things like the 10 commandments in the Bible which are very important.

So when we hear the first commandment, we need to hear the gospel. We need to hear the Lord telling us about something that will help us enjoy life in Christ more deeply. There are many distractions in life but they are only substitutes for knowing Jesus, loving him and following him as his disciples.

The rich young man in our Bible reading was distracted from putting God first in his life. Money was in his way. It blinded him. It deceived him. He had equated obeying rules with putting God first when, in reality, he put money and himself first. Jesus got to the heart of this man, to the real problem with his faith.

This young man is almost certainly a good Jew. He conscious of the ten commandments and all of the other rules for God's people. Each morning every good Jew said the *shema* which is the words, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." And they would go on to say, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." So this guy knew who was supposed to be number one in his life. But something isn't sitting right in his heart. That's why he comes out of nowhere. The Greek in our text says *idou* or *suddenly* this man comes up to Jesus. It's like he is wrestling with some big life questions and when he hears that Jesus, this new and controversial rabbi is around, he runs up to him out of nowhere and suddenly asks Jesus,

Lk 19:16 ..."Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

He's uncertain of his salvation. He's been doing all the right things—living by the rules, you could say. But it's not working for him. So, Jesus replies with another question:

Lk 19:17 "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments."

¹⁸ "Which ones?" the man inquired.

Here, I think, Jesus is expertly leading the man to see that keeping rules won't give you assurance of eternal life. He lists a few commandments from the second table of the law.

Lk 19:18 ...Jesus replied, "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, ¹⁹ honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself."

Lk 19:20 "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?"

Jesus helps expose his problem. You're trying hard to be a good man. You're looking out for other people. You are a good neighbour in many ways. But keeping every rule about neighbour-love isn't going to give you peace with God which you are desperately seeking. Only having God first in your life will do that. Then he tells the man to sell all of his possessions. That's not a guide for every single person. No, here Jesus cuts to the heart of this man and his eternal insecurity. You're problem is that you are putting your trust in yourself. Your money is your security.

To use the words of Dr. David Powlison, a Christian psychologist and author, "Idolatry is something other than God that lies behind your actions, your thoughts, and your feelings. It's what you cling to and depend on." Money is the driving force in the rich man's life. It's his god. And that's why, despite doing good things for his neighbours, the rich man has no peace with God.

That's because rules don't save. And money doesn't save. Only Jesus does. That's why we need the gospel.

Distractions from Gospel Living

Money is a distraction for the rich man. He is defining success in terms of money instead of in a solid relationship with God which comes through Jesus. This rich man, it turns out, is very poor in relation to God. His heart is not set on following Jesus. That's why Jesus tells him,

Lk 19:21 "If you want to be perfect [meaning, if you want to be whole, having God in the right place and being assured of your salvation through Jesus], go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

In short, Jesus said, get rid of the distraction, the thing that is consuming your life and keeping you from putting God first. For the rich man, it was his treasures on earth, the pursuit of riches.

A very ambitious young woman named Beth tells of her struggle with what is distracting her from putting God first. Take a look at this 2 minute video:

Video: **No Time for God**

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1CK9LCmJeB7bThqHclZB9oODQH1J-1CfX>

Kudos to Beth for admitting that she's too distracted. And I think it's important to recognize with her that not relying on God, not pursuing him first in life leads to feeling distant from him. She admitted, "I put athletic training before God. It's so time consuming that I don't have time for God." She realized that her faith is not as strong as it used to be. And consequently, "My problems are a lot bigger."

Beth said, "I can't do both!" But we might be better to say, "We can't worship both." God will not take second place to anything. We can give him second or third place. We can give him no place. But that doesn't change who God is. And it doesn't change the fact that everyone needs him. We need him to find true life. To enjoy life at it's best. To have his presence when life is good but also when we go through a tough chapter.

And the only way to have the real presence of God on a daily basis in our lives comes through following Jesus. Not just striving to be like Jesus. That only leads to making more lists and more rules. The first commandment is about resting in Jesus. You shall have no other gods before our Triune, Almighty God. Therefore, we need to get our life focused on Jesus, believing in him as our Saviour, of course. Remembering that he alone gives us access to God and that he alone gives us peace and strength from God to face the challenges of life each day.

So, our goal as those who want to put and keep God first in our lives in this new year and always is to assess where we've bowed to other gods. Is it like Beth in our pursuit of sports, our career, a future where we seek to control our life? Or is it like the rich young man who put pursued money above all else and, without realizing it, made money his god. What else is there that we put ahead of God? What is it for you?

What do you sacrifice for? Give up time with God so you can make more money or go to some events? We don't always see it right away but, like Beth and the young rich man, we come to realize sooner or later that our pursuit of our idols leads to greater pain and chaos in life, instead of peace.

Becoming Better Disciples

Becoming a better disciple of Jesus, friends, means casting down every idol and following Jesus into his best life for us. It means shaping our life and making choices that will put God in first place and keep him there. Here's where I think we can learn from the early church in Acts 2. They weren't following rules. They were pursuing Jesus.

At the Christmas Eve program here a few weeks ago, I chuckled. On Sundays the church fills up from the back and the later you come the closer to the front you may end up sitting. It's funny to me watching people come in late and trying desperately to squeeze in anywhere but at the front. But when our children and grandchildren are performing, the front fills up first. And that's totally understandable and normal.

It doesn't matter to me where you sit for Sunday worship. But God cares that you're sitting here. In fact, dear people, there is very little that should take the place of Sunday worship in our schedules. And I don't say that because I want full pews. I say it because God wants better disciples. He wants us growing in our faith, participating in the sacraments, hungry for his word, excited to give him our worship and engaged in community. That's what marked the early Church in Acts 2 where God's people were striving to be better disciples of Jesus and where the Lord added new disciples to their number. So when we hear the first commandment, we need to hear the gospel. We need to hear the Lord telling us about something that will help us enjoy life in Christ more deeply. Come and worship. Come to worship to get your life reoriented again and again. That's why God gave the pattern of 6 days of work and one day to rest. We can get by without the day of rest but it will catch up with us. We are all easily led astray by other gods in our society.

Ariel Sanchez was like many of us. He writes in CoreChristianity.com, "Throughout much of college, I didn't have a strong tie to the local church. Regrettably, I just didn't think that being connected to a local body, and attending church on Sundays was that important for Christians..." He was a bit like Beth in our video.

However, one day he met someone over a coffee. This man was from Chicago and happened to be a huge fan of the Chicago Bears. Growing up in San Diego, says Ariel, I knew what it was like to have a home team that you grew up watching and rooting for." He "took me under his wing, and ... He said something during our time together that stunned me. "Even if I had tickets to see the Bears in the Superbowl on a Sunday morning, I wouldn't go..."

I laughed out loud as if to suggest that he was crazy. "Are you serious?" I replied. He was. At that moment, I thought he was a little extreme. I remember thinking to myself, "What's the big deal? The Superbowl is once a year! If they make it, your team probably isn't going to go again in your lifetime!" He was being

absolutely genuine though. “No,” he said with a slight grin. “What’s more special than being gathered together around God’s throne with God’s people?” It was hard to argue with him. I just hadn’t met many Christians who actually believed that at the time. My thinking had been: “yeah, the church is important, but the Christian life is really about your relationship with Jesus. You don’t need to be in church to have a healthy relationship with God.”

Later Ariel was reading Saint Cyprian of Carthage, a 3rd century bishop in the Christian church. He famously said, *outside the church, there is no salvation*. The sentiment of Cyprian is hard to sell today because we’re so used to making a rule out of the exception. Yes, writes Ariel, “there are extraordinary circumstances that keep the sheep from hearing the voice of the Shepherd on a Sunday through a called preacher. But ordinarily speaking, to neglect Christian fellowship and the means of grace through which God grants us communion with himself is a terrible sin. And ...it often leads to more sin.”

Like Ariel and Cyprian, the catechism talks about disregarding the first commandment as a means of endangering our salvation. The fact is that the less importance we give to the Lord, the more likely we are to be led astray and away from Jesus. So, taking worship and other spiritual growth action seriously is important for the Christian! And teaching our children by word and example that Jesus is number one in our life is very important.

I point us to the book of Acts as an example this morning of God’s people hungering for more of Jesus by gathering together for worship. But over and over the Bible calls God’s people to gather together. To take seriously the call of the elders to come and worship (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-16). To “not neglect to meet together,” says Hebrews 10:25, “as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another,” in the faith more and more. To come and worship. Keeping God first is something every Christian should long for; and being in church on Sunday is integral to our Christian growth. Again, not because it’s a rule. But because it’s a blessing that is good for us in our walk with God.

Think about what Ariel was asked: “What to you is more exciting (or more important) than gathering with God’s people around God’s throne? Have we so lost sight of what is taking place in worship that entertainment has become more captivating? Do we think that somehow we’ve surpassed our predecessors, and no longer need to gather together, and encourage one another?”

Friends, our Lord Jesus, “the King himself is the one summoning us” to join together with him for worship because this is where he meets us and feeds us to keep us strong, to help us become better disciples. And “more than demanding you bring your gifts to him, he’s bringing his gifts to share with you! Those gifts may come to us through humble means: the lips of a stuttering pastor, some bread and wine,” a song that stirs our hearts, but this is where God meets us together and where he strengthens us to be better disciples. Let’s keep God first by ensuring that he’s the one we worship. There are lots of distractions in our world. That’s why our corporate worship as God’s people is an important part of keeping ourselves oriented to the one true God.