

Ash Wednesday
March 1, 2017
Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Matthew 22:37,38 Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment.

The First and Greatest Command: Love

There are some things you can count on whenever you see a doctor. You know the office workers will make sure they have your correct billing information. You know you will be asked to arrive early and then wait. And you know once you are actually in that little room, whether it is a nurse or the doctor, someone will examine your heart. It doesn't matter if you are in for a routine checkup or you have been rushed to the hospital for an emergency. You can guarantee they will check your heart. And it makes sense, doesn't it? If there are major problems with your heart, they won't just casually run tests on all the other minor medical issues that could be wrong with you.

Ash Wednesday can be like a great medical exam for your soul. Think of today as a way to check out your relationship with God. It starts with your heart. Before we go on to all the other minor issues in your spiritual life, let's do a thorough check of your heart. And so today we start with the First Commandment: You shall have no other gods.

We typically think of the 10 Commandments as God's rules. We might look at them as his list of do's and don'ts. We even start to think they will help us have a better, more successful life if we follow them. But Jesus gives us a different way of looking at all the commandments. You can boil all 10 down to one simple word: Love. And Jesus wants us to see this very first of the commandments about our love for God. Jesus makes it pretty simple: **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”** (Matthew 22:37)

God is getting to the heart of your relationship with Him. God wants you to think of him and treat him alone as your only God. Love him more than anyone or anything else. Sounds simple. But obviously it's not that simple. Obviously, God is aware there are rival, competing gods your heart will be drawn to. For you that probably isn't a Buddha statue in your home or an altar to some Hindu deity. But just because it isn't out in the open, doesn't mean your heart doesn't struggle with a rival god. Martin Luther explains that your idol is probably secret, rather than out in the open. He defines an idol this way: **Anything on which your heart relies and depends is really your God.** (Large Catechism) Luther continues: **Idolatry does not consist merely of erecting an image and praying to it, but it is primarily a matter of the heart, which fixes its gaze upon other things and seeks help and consolation from [them].** (LC) So it could be hidden. It could even be secret. Your false god could actually be something you are worshiping without realizing you are doing it.

How could that happen? A pastor and Bible scholar explains it this way: “The human heart takes good things like a successful career, love, possessions, even family, and turns them into ultimate things.” (Keller, p. xvi) These things are all good. God gives them to you as blessings. But human beings tend to turn them into something more than just good. They become goals for life. Instead of blessings, they become what defines our lives. Instead of enriching our lives, we turn to them to find our value and purpose and meaning in life. These ultimate things absorb your heart and imagination more than God. Without realizing it, you seek from this ultimate thing something only God can give you. They become your gods.

Something strange happened in my house a little over a year ago. It happened when I realized I could run down to Target and get an antenna for my TV for under \$20. Now I can get all the major broadcast channels coming in crystal clear without paying a dime to a cable company. See, my children have only ever known shows from the content they can get online. So whenever we do watch over the air TV shows, usually football, they are fascinated by the commercials. They care more about the commercials than the shows (although that might just be their reaction to football). But their response to each and every commercial is the same: Dad, we have to get that!

Now if you grew up with only antenna signals coming into your TV or the prehistoric times when you had to get up to change the channels and you only could choose between three channels, this probably sounds pretty funny. That someone would be so easily influenced by a commercial. Over time you watch enough commercials and you become immune to them. Or so you think.

There are subconscious messages bombarding you all the time. These messages gradually, over time just get absorbed into your heart. You don't actually buy any of those magazines in the grocery check out aisle with their models and celebrities on the covers. But you absorb the message that you can't be content with who you are unless you have a beach-ready body that will look amazing in a bikini. That you should feel ashamed of yourself unless your home could compete with the style and artwork and decorating inside those magazines. And maybe you don't define your manhood the way some guys do when they leer and whistle at women, but you've absorbed subconsciously this belief that you are defined by what you contribute to your family. You are only what you provide and the standard of living you can give to your loved ones.

These messages bombard your heart and work to sell you their idols. You don't make a conscious choice to switch from the God to a false god. It just happens. Your heart is taken captive. And you can perform a little exam on your heart to identify your idols. What is the thing that would be absolutely devastating if you lost it? If there is no longer any way to get it, you can't achieve it, it is gone for ever and would make your life seem no longer worth living. That, my friend, is your idol.

Maybe this is where we need to take a step back and consider why God has given us this commandment in the first place. It is not to restrict us or keep us from going off the rails or prevent us from having a little fun or to show his control over our lives as if we were all his robot slaves. Before God launches into the list of commandments he sets down for his people to follow, he sets a very important reminder. He sets the tone with this simple message: "I am the LORD your God." (Exodus 20:2) God doesn't want you to have any other gods, because they aren't gods. Not only is anything or anyone that is after your heart an imposter god, but it is absolutely useless. It is incapable of being god for you.

Do you see that this is God's way of protecting you? God is guarding your heart. Because all of those idols out there can't give you what only God can give you. They can't bring you ultimate fulfillment or ultimate happiness or lasting meaning for your life, because that's not what they are designed to do. Only God can do that. And when you find yourself a failure in front of all your idols, there is nothing they can do for you. Only God can truly forgive you even when you fail Him.

So what's the solution? You know you need a change. But it's not just a matter of trying a few things to give your life a few tweaks. There's no pill you can take that will address some of the symptoms and side effects of an idolatrous heart. Change is necessary. Real change requires a new heart. You need heart replacement surgery.

Repentance recognizes that you have an idol. Repentance realizes your heart has been fixated and focused on finding life in something other than God. But it's more than that. Repentance is turning away from that idol and turning to Jesus. Turning to Jesus allows us to see someone whose hearts was always and

exclusively and perfectly tuned in to God. See in Jesus someone who knows how easily your heart is influenced and led away from God. See in Him the one who knew he had to **“Love the Lord your God with all [his] heart and...soul and...mind”** since you are incapable of doing precisely that. (Matthew 22:37) See in Jesus the one who knows the penalty for idolatry is death and so suffered your death for you. See in Jesus the one who understood one sin deserves eternal punishment, so he suffered your hell on the cross. The one and only solution to the idols in your heart is to repent and rejoice in the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ.

What would change in your life if you had received a new heart by a lifesaving transplant? You might realize you can't go back to the way of life you had before even if you just fell into it without thinking about it. Now you have to replace those subconscious messages bombarding your heart with a conscious effort. New habits, new routines, new practices will need to take hold so you don't just default to those same old habits that got you into trouble in the first place, those dangerous habits that developed over years and decades.

It starts with your new heart. It goes back repeatedly, constantly to who you are in Christ. In Christ you have a pure heart free from guilt and shame. In Christ you have a heart undefiled by idolatry. In Christ you have a perfect relationship with your God that pushes out the need to find meaning and value and significance in all those competing gods. In Christ you actually have the forgiveness and unconditional love you could never get from those good things you so often turn into ultimate things. In Christ you have a new perspective on life and God's gifts to you. That includes the gift of God's love he gives you in his commandments. So join us for the next 5 weeks as we work to develop new perspectives and new habits on God's gifts of love in the 10 Commandments. Amen.