

The Pulpit

A SERMON BY THE REV. IRA W. HENDERSON

Subject: The First Commandment.

Brooklyn, N. Y.—Preaching at the Irving Square Presbyterian Church, Hamburg avenue and Weirfield street, on the theme, "The First Commandment," the pastor, Rev. Ira Wemmell Henderson, took as his text Ex. 20:3, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." He said:

Given to a people who lived amid polytheistic surroundings and hedged in by the worshipers of the many gods this commandment has as much force in this day as it had then. The call of Jehovah for undivided loyalty at the hands of His people is but the demand of reason. "No man can serve two masters," and he who would try so to do finds out, in whatsoever department of life he may elect the test, that this is a great truth. Granting God only the average of human intellectuality we must agree that the Almighty knew what He was about when He laid fast claim upon the unified service of His chosen people. The history of polytheism is the record of the deadening of the best religious instincts and capabilities in man, and the story of the strife of the deities to secure human patronage.

Grant, if you wish, that the first word is but the appreciation by Moses of the fundamental truths which God had put into the hearts of the best men of the Hebrew nation, rather than a specific, face-to-face, objective revelation of Jehovah's will to Moses alone, and the truth is not quenched. The particular doctrines you may hold as to just what are the means of divine self-revelation and inspiration do not in any way affect the facts. Moses got the truth. That is the point. It is of secondary importance what view you may hold as to how the truth sank into his heart. But this is a digression.

"Thou shalt have no other gods before Me," said Jehovah. And the darkest days of Israel were those when she served the no-gods of the heathens. In this day and generation many peoples are in the midst of the blackness of thick darkness because they serve too many and unworthy gods. The religious activities and spiritual sensibilities of any nation have more to do with its material success than shallow thinkers and cursory students of history are ready to admit. A high religious life has fruit in a fine morality. A deep moral consciousness finds expression in clean and beneficent conduct. And good conduct concerns the health of all the departments of life wherein human energy is expended. A nation of many gods will, for reasons that are easily perceived, soon degenerate. When men may play the gods against each other for personal gain it is easy to compute how long it will be before all social life will become corrupt.

But much as we may be interested in the study of the effects of polytheistic religions upon the conduct of nations, and willing as we may be to contemplate the evil and disastrous consequences of such religions upon the entire life of a people, there is yet a more pointed application of the text that very properly may command our attention.

You remember the story of the rich young man? Well, the trouble with him was not that he was rich, but that money was his god. Riches are no sin—if they are righteously acquired. To be rich is to be tried—fearfully tried. Money as a means to the service of God is unmixable good. Money as Mammon is damnation to heart and mind and soul alike. Cash, considered as so much credit from the eternal storehouse of God's wealth, is capable of much good. Gold, as greed and the gainer of personal self-satisfaction alone, is a curse.

As the young man, who so touched the heart of Jesus, allowed his bank account to deter him from the service God demanded of him, so many of us serve money, ambition, social demands and social preferment, instead of Jehovah. The man who sacrifices all that is best within him upon the altar of money is a fool. The next panic may sweep him away and drag his wealth from him. The woman who works herself almost to death and makes a slave of her husband that they may have only clear water ahead of them in the social swim, will, when the end is come, find that it is all a farce and that a younger, better looking, richer woman, whose husband has more cash, now leads the social race. No man can serve ambition for ambition's sake and keep his peace with God. Ambition, selfish ambition, I mean, knows not God and respects no man. The rush for a place at the top, either in politics or society, is largely responsible for that deadening of the finer impulses and that stultification of conscience that, in many circles, we see to-day.

But lest we become too destructive, let us consider the constructive and positive aspects of the commandment. To answer the query of those who tried Him in His exegesis of the ten words Jesus promulgated the clinching and summarizing commandment, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." From the entirety of the heart and in its unity; with the central and soul life; intellectually and in the fulness of spiritual strength; in short, with the whole of his being man is to serve the one true God, the Father of our Lord and of us.

There are three reasons—to enumerate no more—why we should serve Jehovah. The first is that service is obligatory; the second is that it is necessary; the third is that it is satisfactory.

At the centre of all life stands God, the personal loving Father of every man, the Creator of the material world. Back of Him we cannot legitimately go, nor is there any necessity or valid reason to do so. As our Father, He is the source and giver of our lives. To serve Him is

obligatory upon all men. His demand that He be given pre-eminence in every man's life is not unreasonable. If obedience be the duty of every child to a loving earthly parent, who shall question the right of God to make obedience to Himself alone the obligation of every soul? No man of perception will remove God from the world. No man can. The one great, obtrusive fact in life, that constantly forces itself upon our attention, is that God is. Harmony with His laws brings us happiness. Discord with the verities of God puts a man into hell. From the fact that God is the ruler and life of the universe we are bound to conclude that for the preservation of His own integrity and for our own best development it is obligatory that we serve the Lord our God and Him only.

Then, too, it is necessary that men shall give God the prime position in their lives. In order to the glory of the Father—which is the chief end of man—and in order to the cultivation of all that is noblest within them, men must ally themselves with those spiritual and godly elements and ideals in life that make for the highest and the best. No man is so well rounded a man as he who measures his life-work by spiritual and eternal standards. The opportunist has no chance in God's Kingdom. The career that is most a blessing to the individual and to mankind is the one that is grounded in godliness and whose works of righteousness are the result of the inward workings of a holy love. The effort of the rightly balanced man is to be most of use and to have the world mark and remember him as worth while. The man who is most of account and whose memory will be longest cherished is that man whose life is squared to the measure of godliness revealed in Jesus Christ. Goodness is necessary to a lasting success. The man who is the best man and whose achievement is permanent is the man who serves God in the unity of love.

In the last place, the fruits of such service are satisfactory. A man may till the soil and reap many harvests till his barns be full, but if he have no communion with God he will go hungry in the after life. What to you is your money when God calls you to the heavenly places? The amount of Christian character you possess, not the coins that crowd your purse, will be the measure of your value then and there. What are your clothes when death's shroud encloses you? What are you—you who have worshiped at the altar of your own wisdom—when God puts you in the balance? All these things are admittedly unsubstantial. But the wealth of God endures. The Christian who is clothed upon by Jesus Christ shall ever be prepared to stand within the presence of Almighty God. The wisdom of God is sufficient unto the saving of the soul and lasts forever. If we would but reverse things and make all the material elements and all our intellectual abilities subservient and subsidiary and subordinate to the prime work of the spiritual service of Jehovah life would be more satisfactory. He who serves God gets money enough and eternal life. The striver for eminence in godliness and uprightness will be well in the front of Heaven's society and will not want for recognition—among people whose approval is worth anything—here. The deepest knowledge and the hardest task the mind of man can attack is to be found in the appropriation of the eternal wisdom of our God. The fruits of God-serving are peace, joy, contentment, purity, eternal life. The prizes of the world are fleeting. The serving of God is satisfactory. To him who is faithful the reward is sure.

Thoroughness in Religion.

"How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him." (1 Kings 18:21.) "Thorough," then, is the law here. Here is a call on the whole nature to serve God. To you Christ must be all; let Him be supreme. Make the best of yourself, that you may be the better able to serve and glorify Him. Bring to Him your power of thought, your acuteness of reasoning, your wealth of imagination, your play of fancy, as well as all the fervor of your soul. Jesus is your Saviour and your God; then follow Him with your whole soul—always, in all things, at all cost. With both hands—that is, with all your might; earnestly—that is, with all your soul, serve Him who has given Himself for you. With the heart believe, and with the mouth confess, that Jesus is Saviour and Lord.—Dr. Guinness Rogers.

"At the Last."

It is right to seek the good-will of all men, and to desire that they speak well of us, but when we lie down to die it will be an empty pillow if this is all that we can rest on. When we are through with life and all its applause, and are awaiting the final call, we want something more substantial than a Cha-tauqua salute. When the faces we love grow dim to our vision, and we are lying in the twilight of two worlds, there are voices we would much rather hear than the plaudits and the acclaim of our countrymen, and one of them is, "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

Spiritual Helps.

To him who walks in the Spirit all outward things are spiritual helps, and the spirit of God makes itself felt not only from within us, but also by things that border our paths, that meet us in our walks, that are with us in our homes, through words spoken by friends and through the ongoing of time as it enlightens and changes us.—Mountford.

Adorned With Holy Meditations.

Thou must keep thy memory clean and pure, as it were a wedlock chamber, from all strange thoughts, fancies and imaginations; and it must be trimmed and adorned with holy meditations and virtues of Christ's life and passion, that God may continually and ever rest therein.—Robert Leighton.

Mrs. Emma Stolt, of Appleton, Wisconsin.

"A neighbor advised me to use Peruna. I began to improve at once."



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