

Sermon 7-14-19
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W. Hempstead, NY
Martin Luther's Small Catechism Sermon #3. The Second Commandment

No Longer My Own God

In order to understand the importance of the first commandment we need to dig into the basic, fundamental human problem. This is the thing that powers all the judgments of God against humanity, drives the entire world mad and tears our lives apart. The fundamental problem is that all of us are born playing God. That's what original sin is.

When Yahweh created humanity He said of us in Genesis 1:26-27, "26... 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' 27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."

Male and female are not different species. Both were created in the Image of God. And this Image meant that they were not independent of their Creator. Rather, they were a reflection of Him. His goodness was their goodness. Their goodness was His goodness. Theirs was not some goodness different from or opposed to Yahweh's goodness. His love was their love. Their love was His love. Theirs was not some love different from or opposed to Yahweh's love.

So that Adam and Eve would know that Yahweh did not create them to be His robots or slaves, Yahweh created the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and placed it in the center of the Garden of Eden. This tree was not really a tree that would gain them knowledge. Adam and Eve already knew all of what could be known about their Creator and His creation. They were powerfully intelligent beings. Rather, this tree was a God tree. Not eating of its fruit left all matters of good and evil in the hands of Yahweh alone. On the other hand, if Adam ate of it, he would be taking matters of good and evil into his own hands. He would thereby become his own god, deciding good and evil for himself. Therefore, he would have to make his own knowledge of good and evil. And we all know how that has worked out.

In reality, good and evil are not abstract principles simply to be known. They are choices that proceed from a conscious mind. Every choice Yahweh made in creating was a choice between what He wanted and what He didn't want. Good is good because it's God's choice. Evil is evil because Yahweh has rejected it. If Adam ate from the tree, he could choose God's good or his make up his own; God's evil or make up his own. This is why the prophet warns all Adam's descendants in Isaiah 5:20, "20 Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter." This is what all born in original sin are capable of.

So, with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the middle of the Garden, Adam could show his true love for His Creator by simply obeying Yahweh's

command and not eating of it. On the other hand, eating of it would do many things, but chief among them are five. First, Adam would choose evil. Yahweh's command indicates that it was not His will for Adam to eat of it. That's what evil is – not God's will. And Adam could chose it. Second, Adam would have to seat himself on God's high throne in order to decide all matters of good and evil for himself. He would become like God. In so doing, third, Adam would have to kick Yahweh off His throne. It's not possible to kick the Creator of everything off His throne. But Yahweh would let Adam pretend. Fourth, all this would absolutely break the intimate and perfect relationship of love Adam and Eve had with their Creator. Consequently, fifth, all Yahweh's holy and glorious goodness would be lost to them and this world.

The master of calling good evil and evil good is Satan. He was the angel who found it evil that He should have to exist and behave in Yahweh's goodness. And so rejecting Yahweh, Satan fell into complete evil becoming his own god. Satan justified his evil by calling it the right choice. Thus, Satan has his good.

This should not surprise us. Walking in Satan's ways, Hitler had his good. He thought it good that all Jews and non-Aryan nations should perish from the earth. Stalin thought it good that all the farmers opposing his plan to collectivize the land should starve to death along with their families. And so about 29 million died. How could this happen? It's easy when you sit on God's throne and make up the rules for yourself. You can call good whatever you want it to be. You just have to have enough people under your spell.

Don't fool yourself. You and I are the same, just with a lot less power in the world. But in our little worlds we can call good whatever we want. We can call evil whatever we want. And deadly repercussions can flow from our choices.

In the Garden of Eden it was Satan who sidled up to Eve in Genesis chapter 3 with his proposition that it was a great good for Eve to be like God, determining good and evil for herself. The devil reasoned with Eve that since no harm comes to God from determining good and evil for Himself, likewise no harm would come to her – despite Yahweh's warning: you will die.

Therefore, Eve bit – figuratively and literally. Nothing happened when Eve ate the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, except that she became the temptress who got Adam to eat of the fruit. But when Adam – God's appointed doorkeeper of the universe – ate, all hell along with death invaded this universe and it's been here ever since.

Adam and Eve's original sin was playing God and determining good and evil for themselves. They passed it on to us. We're all born pathological God-players determined to define good and evil for ourselves. This is why sin, death and the power of the devil plague us all.

The power of original sin is that we cannot love Yahweh the way He loves us. We cannot let Yahweh be God. Instead, we must sit on His throne and be our own gods.

Therefore, when Yahweh sent His Son into the world to reclaim us for Himself and restore to us the Image of God, our reaction was predictable and remains predictable. Crucify Him. Kill God and get rid of Him. And so Jesus was crucified 2,000 years ago. But Jesus won the day. Resurrected from the dead, He poured out His Spirit upon all flesh and many have been born again in Jesus Christ for the

forgiveness of their sins and a new destiny – to be resurrected from the dead restored in the Image of God. That’s the gospel.

Yet, Satan is not finished and we human rebels are not finished. At the end of the 19th century, the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed, “God is dead and we have killed Him.” It’s true. “God is dead” is the great statement being proclaimed in all our American schools – from nursery school to the university. At the barbershop the other day I picked up a copy of Scientific American while waiting. It’s nothing but a pagan propaganda rag – with very little science and much speculation on how we can explain the universe and the origin of life without a Creator God. And this is what our schools teach. Yahweh is a tyrant preventing us from doing as we please. But, God is dead. The tyrant is dead. We have killed Him. We have removed Him from our world. We don’t love Him. We hate Him. We don’t need Him. We don’t want Him to exist. This is what original sin does.

Yet, who can stop God? Crucifixion and death certainly couldn’t stop Jesus. For in Jesus’ resurrection Yahweh proved once and for all that He is God. We can’t kill the Son of God and keep Him dead. It’s impossible.

And even in His victorious resurrection, Jesus was no tyrant. For, He did something very merciful. He did not reveal Himself resurrected to His enemies. If He had done so, He would have had to judge them on the spot for their murder of Him. Instead, He gave them time to repent. And we know from the book of Acts that beginning fifty days after Jesus’ resurrection, many of His enemies did repent and receive Him as Messiah.

Now giving enemies time to repent of rebellion is not tyranny. That’s freedom. In Jesus Christ, Yahweh calls us to freedom – freedom from the tyranny of ourselves, freedom from the tyranny of being our own god. Jesus died to pay for all the evil that proceeds out of our tyrannical God-playing. He was resurrected and lives to heal us of our tyranny and rebellion. He died and was resurrected to give us a new birth. That new birth, baptized in Jesus Christ is the path that leads from original sin back to original righteousness. It’s the path that leads from the Likeness of God back to the Image of God. The full Image of God will not be restored to believers until the resurrection. However, those baptized into the new birth are on the path.

In this life the key thing that the new birth does is to push us off God’s throne. Those who experience the new birth know that this has happened to them. Thus, God can finally be God in the lives of those who undergo this life-changing transformation. God’s ways can finally be their ways.

Ironically, there is power in no longer being your own god. You would think you would be more powerful being your own god, but it’s not so. Who can set themselves free from the power of addiction or the power of anger and hate? Who can set themselves free from their own rebellion against God? The power of being our own god is an illusion – a deadly illusion.

In the new birth in Christ, God graciously gives us the power to forsake choosing good and evil for ourselves. When we’re pushed off God’s throne, then God’s power to think and live healthily and rightly flows freely from His throne to us. And most importantly God releases the power of His incredible love – His commitment, time and energy – into our lives. It’s one thing to hear that God is love. It’s quite another to know it and experience it.

But the new birth also kindles a love for our Creator within the human heart. It changes the commitment, time and energy of our lives. And this is where the first three commandments come into play.

When you're no longer your own god, then it becomes much easier to have no other gods before Yahweh. It becomes much easier to have things God's way. It becomes much easier to have Yahweh's definitions of good and evil. It becomes much easier to fear love and trust in God above all things, as Martin Luther explained the first commandment in his Small Catechism.

When you're no longer your own god, it also becomes much easier not to misuse the name of the Lord your God as the second commandment instructs us.

Here's the second commandment as it appears in Luther's Small Catechism.

You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
What does this mean?

We should fear and love God so that we do not curse, swear, use satanic arts, lie or deceive by His name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.

Those who despise God think nothing of using the Name of Jesus as an expression of disgust. Life presents us with difficult situations all the time. But those who find themselves pushed off the throne of Yahweh refuse to use Jesus' Name to express their disgust. Instead, they will call upon the gracious Name of Jesus in every trouble. And when you've been given love for your Savior, how can you use this great Name for anything but prayer, praise and thanksgiving?

Now, those giving testimony in a court used to swear that they would tell the truth, so help them God. That's not exactly using the Name of Yahweh or the Name of Jesus. Still, God knows everything. He knows if false testimony is being given in His Name and He will judge accordingly. In short, people who lie and deceive ought to leave Yahweh out of it. It's bad enough they're lying.

Then, there's the rebellious notion that Yahweh's Name or Jesus' can be used to cast spells and do other occult business. Those who lust to exert tyrannical spiritual powers over others may attempt this. But such folk will only bring a curse down upon themselves. For they are sitting on God's throne where they don't belong. And they are trying to exercise rebellious spiritual power in His Name, something that can't be done.

Those given the new birth approach the Name of Jesus and the Name of Yahweh in an entirely new light. As it says in Proverbs 18:10, "The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe." Speaking of those resurrected in Jesus Christ we read in Revelation 22:4, "They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."

The new birth in Jesus brings new attitudes and new ways of doing things. It enables us to call evil what Yahweh calls evil. It enables us to call good what Yahweh calls good. This is a great blessing. For it enables us to rightly use the great Name of our Creator. It enables us to rightly use the Name of Jesus – the Name that will be on the foreheads of all the redeemed forever and forever.

Jesus is the only one who can restore us to what Adam and Eve lost. He is the only one who can renew the Image of God within us. As we struggle against the sinful nature in this life, this is the great hope we look forward to. And in the struggle of this life Jesus is God with us, Emmanuel. May His Name be on our foreheads, now and for ever. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.