From Thought to Action

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

1 November 2026

Children's Talk:

Today we are going to talk about what we make most important. Our story has two objects in it: one is the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was a box that had the Ten Commandments inside of it. It was the centre of the worship of the Children of Israel, similar to how we have a copy of the Word at the front and centre of our church. The other object is an idol, a statue of a god called Dagon. The enemies of Israel, the Philistines, worshipped Dagon.

One time the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant. They took it and put it in front of their statue of Dagon, to show that Dagon was better and stronger and more important than the Lord. But things didn't go as they expected:

> Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon and set it by Dagon. And when the people of Ashdod arose early in the morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the earth before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and set it in its place again. And when they arose early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. The head of Dagon and both the palms of its hands were broken off on the threshold; only Dagon's torso was left of it. Therefore neither the priests of Dagon nor any who come into Dagon's house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.
> But the hand of the LORD was heavy on the people of Ashdod, and He ravaged them and struck them with tumours, both Ashdod and its territory. And when the men of Ashdod saw how it was, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is harsh toward us and Dagon our god." (1 Samuel 5:1-7)

Even though the Philistines had captured the Ark and but it before Dagon, the Ark had more power than the idol, because the Lord was stronger than Dagon. The statue was broken down and the people suffered, and realized they had to give back the Ark.

This story tells us something about our own lives. The Ark stands for all the things that the Lord teaches us. What are the important things the Lord teaches us?

[write on sticky notes and place on the image of the Ark; e.g. forgive, love, help, don't hit, don't lie, think of other people first, etc.].

Dagon stands for all the things that we want for ourselves but that hurt people. What are some of the bad things we are tempted to do or say? [write answers on sticky notes and place on image of Dagon; e.g. taking things, pride, gossip, lies, making fun of someone, etc.].

Sometimes we remember that the Lord and other people are the most important things, and so we choose to worship the Lord and love other people. But sometimes we start to feel that we ourselves and getting what we want is the most important thing, and so we don't listen to the Lord and we forget to treat other people well. But even though we sometimes think it is so important to get what we want, we can't make ourselves happy by being unkind and selfish. Just as the idol of Dagon was shattered, when we become selfish, it breaks things and hurts us.

But when we follow the Lord, He will give us happiness and love.

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The Ten Commandments are all of the rules of life that a person needs to know in order to live a good and happy life. Some of these commandments are concrete and have to do with how we interact with our neighbor: don't lie, don't steal, don't murder, and don't commit adultery. These commandments make sense and almost come naturally to us as ways of living moral lives (*True Christian Religion* §282; *Secrets of Heaven* §8902). The first commandment however has more to do with how we interact with God and is more abstract: don't worship other gods (*True Christian Religion* §456). As we look at these more abstract truths about God our goal will be to understand how to apply them to our daily lives. Our guiding light will be this passage:

> There are many truths which appear to pertain to faith only; as, that there is a God, that the Lord, who is God, is the Redeemer and Savior; that there is a heaven and a hell; that there is a life after death; and many others, of which it is not said that they are to be done, but that they are to be believed. These truths which pertain to faith are also dead with the man who is principled in evil, but alive with the man who is principled in good." (*Doctrine of Life* §47)

Today we will look at the first commandment: you shall have no other gods before me.

Part I: The Lord vs. Other Gods

The very first commandment, the commandment that is more important than all of the other ones, is this:

> You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Exodus 20:3-6)

So the question for you is, “how many of you have ever worshipped an idol?” Or “How many of you have worshipped a god other than the Lord?” It looks like most of us have done a really good job of keeping this first commandment. Now that’s a good thing, but I bet that all of us have broken this commandment without even realizing that we were doing it. That’s because worshipping other gods means more than praying to someone other than the Lord or praying to a statue. Any time that we make something selfish more important than the Lord we are worshipping that thing as if it were another god or an idol.

What I want you do to is to think of times that you have made something more important than the Lord. I’ll start. Sometimes I make laziness and getting rest more important that getting work done for others. So for me laziness can become a god or an idol. What are some of the things that you make more important than the Lord and what He teaches us?

Now worshipping the Lord also does not just mean we come to church and pray to Him. Worshipping the Lord means that we pay attention to the things that He says are important and we actually do them. So what are the things that the Lord thinks are important? I’ll start. I think that telling the truth is something that is very important to the Lord. What else is important to the Lord?

When we do all of these things we are worshipping the Lord. When these get in the way we are not worshipping the Lord; we are worshipping another god. Think about what you make important in your life. Think about the things you care about. Think about how you treat other people. Are you making the Lord the most important or are you letting yourself get in the way? Remember to worship the Lord by listening to what He teaches us and then doing it every day. That is how we worship the Lord.

Part II: Jesus Christ

Digging deeper into this commandment we find harder truths. The one that I want to focus on today is in the spiritual meaning of the commandment not to have any other gods besides the Lord.

> All who acknowledge and worship any other God than the Lord the Savior, Jesus Christ, who is Jehovah God Himself in human form, sin against this first commandment. (True Christian Religion 296)

So we started by asking, “What other than the Lord do you make a god?” We are pushed to go even further though and ask, “What other than Jesus Christ do we make a god?” Technically these questions mean the same thing, but we are often more comfortable in the abstract and less comfortable when forced to enter into specifics. On a very simple level that’s why it’s easy to say “let’s get lunch some time” but much harder to actually commit to a specific time. If we leave it general we get the good feeling like we’ve made a plan without any of the hard work. We don’t like losing the freedom that vagueness gives us.

So too with the Lord: the Lord is big and powerful and wonderfully abstract. Saying “Jesus Christ” specifically brings home that were not just talking about some distant God figure, we’re talking about a very particular person who has very specific things to say to us. So if we make other gods by elevating things in importance over the Lord, how does focusing in on Jesus Christ as the Lord help us get more specific?

The answer I think is that it draws our attention to specific things that Jesus Christ taught that are hard to take. Teachings like forgive your brother even if he sins against you seventy times seven times; love your enemies, do good to those who hate you; sell all that you have and give to the poor; take up your cross and follow me; lay down your life for your friends; what does it profit to gain the whole world and lose your soul? I’m sure you can think of your own teachings from the Lord that you

struggle with. So when we try to avoid living these teachings, what is it that we are making a god over Jesus Christ? Is it our own comfort and enjoyment? Our sense of entitlement? Ourselves?

It's hard to worship Jesus Christ because it takes focus and discipline and restricting ourselves to specific ideas that are true that we'd much rather were not true. It is easier to pay lip service to a vague idea of charity and leave it at that. But the Lord calls us to rise above that mentality. He wants us to focus our worship on Him and Him alone. He wants us to do this because He knows that when we truly worship Him, not just with words on Sunday morning but with our actions every day of the week, we will find joy and success that nothing else can grant us.

Amen.