

Exodus 20:1-6; Matthew 6:21
“The First Commandment”
Ash Wednesday (A)

February 22, 2023
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Martin Luther was steadfast to this point: We should daily exercise ourselves in the catechism, which is a short summary of the entire Holy Scriptures. Since we can never master the catechism, Luther says that Christians ought to daily read them and practice them through reading, repetition, and meditation.

We ought to do this because catechism study is the most effective help against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts. We do this, because the devil cannot stand God’s Word because it is **“the power of God”** (Romans 1:16) that gives the devil burning pain while the Scriptures strengthen, comfort, and help Christians beyond all measure.

This Ash Wednesday evening we recall our need for salvation with the words: **“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return”** (Genesis 3:19). God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed life into him. Although man was created to live forever, we don’t because of man’s fall into sin as we return to the dust of the ground. So, those ashes upon our foreheads symbolize our mortality and need for a savior. Because of sin, we have a misplaced trust.

Tonight, we begin the first of our Lenten sermon series on the Ten Commandments as we focus upon the First Commandment: **“You shall have no other gods before Me”** (Exodus 20:3).

To this commandment, from his Small Catechism, Luther says this means: *“We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”* Tonight, we will look at what it means to have a god, and what it means to fear, love, and trust.

First, what does it mean to have a god? Well, a god is who or what we expect all good and in which we take refuge in all distress. In other words, whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in is truly your god. How would you answer these questions: “Who do I truly love? What am I really wanting? What am I really trusting? What are my true priorities in life? What is really shaping my thinking and behavior?” Jesus says: **“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”** (Matthew 6:21).

You see, your heart is the center of your personality. Included in the heart is the mind, emotions, and the will. Your heart will dwell on whatever you treasure most.

In America, we have come accustomed to the motto: “*In God we trust.*” The question is, who or what is this god that you trust in?

First of all, everyone has a god, including the atheists who say that they don’t. We all have a god, because as human creatures, we are dependent beings. We did not create ourselves, and we do not give life to ourselves. Thus, no human being can live without looking somewhere or to someone for those things that support and sustain life or that give life direction, meaning, and purpose. In other words, no human being can live without trust or faith.

What do you fear, love, and trust? That is always the key question. What is your false god? You see, idolatry is not merely a matter of statues and shrines. As Luther says in his Large Catechism: “*[Idolatry] happens not merely by erecting an image and worshipping it, but rather it happens in the heart*” (LC I:21).

So, what do you fear, love, and trust? Well, it could be almost anything. Ponder these examples. Perhaps you fear, love, and trust in what Luther calls “*mammon,*” this is, money and possessions. Luther calls “*mammon*” the most common idol on the earth, for he who has money and possessions feels secure.

How will things be fine? How about having a large bank account? How many of us hope to strike it rich through the lottery? If I only won the lottery, then I would have joy and happiness. Or if you don’t have much money and possessions, you are full of doubts and despair. You fret. You worry. You complain as you try to get the money and possessions. Again, whatever you fear, love, and trust, that is truly your god.

Instead of being content with what the Lord has given us, we seek even more mammon, but when we get them, our need for mammon grows larger still, despite Christ giving us everything we need.

So, what do you fear, love, and trust? How often do we choose to please family and friends more than we please God? How often do we choose family or sports over the gifts God provides in the Divine Service? Now, family and sports are not evil in themselves, but how often do they become an idol? Remember it is all a matter if they become more important than God Himself.

How about this example: health. In recent times, health has become a chief false god in our age. So many of us put our fear, love, and trust in Big Pharma to save us from temporal ailments and diseases. We would rather take any doctor-prescribed drug, but when it comes to eternal salvation, we choose to keep ourselves away from the medicine of immortality, which is the Lord's Body and Blood under the bread and the wine in the Lord's Supper.

How about this example: giving up the Creator and worshipping the creation. How often do we hear from our political leaders that the earth is in an existential crisis due to man-made climate change? What is their solution? Serve their interests and then we can save the earth. In doing so, we put our fear, love, and trust in them, rather than the one true God, who alone has the power to create and destroy the earth. For many, political parties have become our gods. How often do we trust a politician's word as gospel? Or we worship ourselves as gods. "I know best. I know what I want. I can do whatever I want. I believe in myself. I look out for number one." Remember, whatever you fear, love, and trust, that is truly your god.

When bad things happen, where do you turn? So often we think that we can fix our own problems. So, instead of calling out to the one true God – *the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* – we turn to another idol. Remember, whatever you fear, love, and trust, that is truly your God.

In the Garden of Eden, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit created us to fear, love, and trust in Him, since He alone provided only good things and always good things for Adam and Eve. God was their true and only devotion. But along came Satan in the form of a serpent. Satan deceived our first parents as they turned away from God and His promises. They no longer loved God. They actually despised Him, since they thought He was holding out on them. They doubted Him. Instead, they feared Satan. They trusted the forbidden fruit. They prided in themselves. This has been the situation ever since.

So, what do you fear, love, and trust?

God tells us: "***I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love Me and keep My commandments***" (Exodus 20:5b-6).

Here, God is defining what it means to fear Him. To fear God means that we take Him seriously, that we know He means what He says. So, yes, we should fear His wrath. He can strike you down with hardly a flick of His little finger.

The opposite of fear is to despise. Therefore, we anger God by trusting in anything but Him. You see, God's Commandments are no joke to Him. Those who hate Him are those who persist in their defiance and pride.

But as terrible as these threats are, so much more powerful is the consolation of God's promise. For those who cling to Him alone are sure of His mercy. He will show them pure goodness and blessing not only for themselves but also to their children and their children's children.

God shows His love in His promise. But who can keep His commandments? Only one Person. Only Jesus, the Savior of the world.

Adam and Eve fell into temptation and fell into sin. But when Jesus was tempted by the same deceiver who tripped up Adam and Eve, He did not fall into sin. Instead, Jesus did fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

Jesus knows that you cannot keep the First Commandment. That is why He kept it and still keeps it for you. That's why He endured God's wrath for you, in your place. That's why He gives you His perfect fear, love, and trust in God. Yes, we are to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. And when God the Father looks at you through Christ, that's exactly what He sees – a person who fears, loves, and trusts in Him above all things. Jesus is your trust. Because of Jesus, God the Father gives you every blessing and every protection in all times of need.

So, who do you fear, love, and trust? The God who created you to fear, love, and trust: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +