

# Let Nothing Come Between You and God

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Volcano Colima, photo by Sergio Tapiro

Preaching on:  
Exodus 20:1–20

When I was 6-years old, I broke one of the ten commandments. I killed a guy. No, I didn't. I didn't! I kinda wish I had though, because, man, that would've been a great way to start of a sermon. I stole a matchbox car. I stole a matchbox car. Not so impressive, and not so bad, right? But no other experience of my life has separated me further from the experience of God than that stupid matchbox car.

Now, look, you shouldn't steal. We all know that. But, also, if you steal a matchbox car as a kid, you shouldn't feel totally depraved and hell damned, wracked with guilt. I did. And at age 12, years later, I was having horrible dreams about being damned by God for that stupid car. I would have this terrible,

recurring nightmare that I would wake up buried in my coffin and know that I was separated from God totally because God hated me because I was such an awful sinner. This was all about a matchbox car.

And the problem was, I think, that the eighth commandment, “Thou shalt not steal,” was made out to me by some of my early religious educators to be more important than God. The idea of my sinfulness, which was an idea put in my head by— I’m sure—well-meaning adults, was an idea that prevented me for a long time from directly experiencing the fullness of God’s presence in my life. My fallenness, my guilt were made out to be more important than my experience of a loving, forgiving, and saving God. My dream of that coffin is the exact opposite of the truth of the Good News of God, right? The exact opposite. They got the facts right—we need saving. They got the emphasis exactly backwards. It’s not sin first, God second. It’s God first, God first, God first.

So, my first question for you this morning is what is coming in between you and the full experience of God? Which of the ten commandments is standing between you and forgiveness? What past action—from murder to matchbox cars—has gotten in between you and God? What emotion, what feeling, what guilt has squeezed in between you and the experience of God’s love? Even if you have something to truly be ashamed about—I bet you do. I have some of those too—the good news is they are not God. And our God is bigger than them all. Don’t damn yourself when there is a God who has made a way beyond hell. God has made a way for all broken people to heal. The question is, are you willing to climb the fiery mountain to that forgiveness and relationship? Or would you rather say in fear, don’t let God speak to me. I’ll surely die. Are you willing to be in the presence of God? That’s the question.

Now, luckily I don’t have a grudge against the ten commandments. They actually taught me a lot. They taught me a lot more than don’t steal, don’t kill. They taught me, Don’t ever let anything get between you and God! Don’t ever let anything get in between you and God. Oh, and by the way, that’s the first commandment. Don’t let anything get in between you and God. There is no other god, no other anything, that comes before God.

There have been more than a few fights over the ten commandments—displaying them in schools, in courthouses, in front of your statehouse, stuff like that. It’s gone all the way to the Supreme Court even. I think it’s silly to try to erase the symbol of the ten commandments out of our history. But there are a few things I have always found very ironic about the desire to display the ten commandments and to be putting up new displays of the ten commandments—especially as a sort of evangelical Christian move to wrap the ten commandments up in the flag.

The great irony to me is that true believers are fighting to put up in public graven images—literally—of tablets that directly command us not to make graven images. Now, you could certainly argue that statues of the ten commandments are not technically idols, but I think it all depends on how you relate to the image, to the display. Is your focus on the object, on the display, directing people to the ultimate God behind and beyond the ten commandments, or is it just sort of muddying the waters? Yes, God

gave us the law, God us the ten commandments, but God doesn't ever want us to replace the direct experience of God with any thing, any graven image, any other idea or concept at all—even one as lofty as the ten commandments.

The first time we get the ten commandments, in our scripture reading this morning, God doesn't even write anything down. This is God's original intention for the ten commandments. No tablets at all. (The second time we get tablets, but they get smashed. The third time we get new tablets, and they get lost. It's not about the tablets.) God just speaks the words on the mountaintop—with lots of thunder and lighting and smoke and fire. It's not about a display of stone tablets—it's about an overwhelming, direct, undeniable, human experience of God.

But the people are terrified. Who can blame them? I was terrified when I was a six-year-old boy. They're scared to death of experiencing God directly, right? They say to Moses, "We're never going up that mountain, buddy. No way! Leave us outta it! You go up there. You speak with that God. Come back down. You can tell us what happened. But we're not going up ourselves."

So my second question for you this morning is: Do you have an experience of God or are you merely surrounded by displays of stone tablets? Now, I am not asking you, "Have you ever in the past had an experience of God?" I'm asking if you actively have an experience of God, in this present moment. Is there some piece of your soul, right now, on the mountaintop speaking with God? Or, instead, are there a lot of thoughts, ideas, beliefs, idols, words, words, words, mediating between you and that mountaintop—that direct experience of God?

One night when I was 12-years old I was at summer camp and I had the nightmare of being stuck in my coffin. And I woke up in this pitch black, unfamiliar bed, all tangled up in my sleeping bag and I thought for sure that I really was in that coffin for real this time. And I was about to SCREAM. When all of a sudden I heard this little whimper next to my bed. And by instinct, I sat up and reached out and touched this little trembling body next to my bed. Shhhh. Shhhh. Shhhh. I rubbed his back and I remembered where I was. And it was one of the younger campers had woken up in the night and had to pee, couldn't find his flashlight, got lost in the dark and got stuck next to my bunk and started to cry. So, I gave him my flashlight. He went to the bathroom. Left the bathroom light on and jumped back in his bunk.

And I was just sitting up on my bed watching all of this when suddenly it felt as if something had very gently, very pleasantly taken off the top of my skull and had started to pour molten lava down through my head into my whole body. It felt like God was pumping pure love through my whole being. And it was so incredibly overwhelming that I fell back on my bed in a swoon. And in that moment, I KNEW that God is not the one who damns us to the darkness, but that God is the one who reaches out to us in the darkness. And I knew that no matter what happened to me—even if I WERE to wake up in my coffin—that SOMEHOW I would be as SAFE as I was in that mystical moment being filled up with God's love.

That's the realest thing I've ever experienced! More real than anything else I could ever imagine experiencing. Nothing could ever happen to me that would be bigger, more real, more important than that experience. I received an incredible gift—a direct and orchestrated experience of God's truth and love. That experience is not in my past, it lives in the present moment. It's always there. It defines me, it defines the reality I experience, it defined what I believe is possible in the world, and it defines what I believe, Beloved, is possible for all of you—a direct, unmediated experience of God. Let no idol, no idea, no belief, no sin, no sacredness come in between you and that living, real possibility. Do not worship the idea of God. Bow down and worship no idea. Bow down and experience. And I promise you, God will show up first and foremost because there is nothing before God. The first commandment promises us that this is true. Do not be afraid! Let nothing stand between you and God.