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The Second Commandment, 1966.

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

The Temple

Sunday, March 27, 1966

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

In America at this moment the orchestration of religious life is ecumenical. Churchmen are busy re-discovering the ties that bind. The unchurched are eager for an end to a long and lingering period of bitterness and distance. Twice blessed today is the man who can emphasize a truth in another man's teaching.

It is against this background of determined amiability that I should like to discuss the Second of the Ten Commandments. The text is well known:

"Thou Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me. Thou Shalt Not Make Unto Thee Any Graven Image, Or Manner Of Likeness Of Anything That Is In The Heavens Above, Or Earth Beneath Or The Waters On The Earth. Thou Shalt Not Bow Down To Them Nor Serve Them For I, The Lord, Thy God, Am A Zealous God, Visiting The Iniquities Of The Fathers Unto The Second And Third Generation Of Them That Hate Me, Showing Mercy Unto The Thousandth Generation Of Them That Love Me And Keep My Commandments"

The Second Commandment casts a parochial shadow. It says quite clearly that there is a limit to ecumenicity. There is a worship that is proper and there is a worship which is improper, and necessarily proscribed. The Second Commandment was enunciated in an age not unlike our own. In religious matters the pagan world was syncretistic and ecumenical. Men were flexible about their gods. They were quite prepared to add another god or other gods to their pantheon and quite prepared to worship at other shrines. Denominational relativism was basic to the pagan way of life. The Second Commandment represented a blast of cold air pushing the Hebrew away from the heathen consensus. The Second Commandment was a chilling reminder that the Jew could not adopt the comfortable rationalization that there is some truth in all teaching, and some virtue in every worship.

The Second Commandment forces us to reexamine these questions: 'Does it really matter where I worship? Are all the modern faiths equally valid? Is it enough simply to believe? Must I be concerned with the content and the

substance of belief? '

The orchestration in religious life today is ecumenical. At its best this melody has made it possible for men of varying persuasions to unite in common concern against common enemies - endemic poverty and ruthless violence, widespread ignorance and obstinant injustice. The mingling of various ecclesiastical garbs in the work of our center city; in slum clearance, in educational renewal, in voter registration and the peace movement, is evidence of the effectiveness of this cooperation. It augurs well for a better community.

Not so very long ago, when we studied comparative religions, we had described for us the rites and ceremonies of other faiths and because they were other they seemed quaint and bizarre, if not somewhat outlandish. We had listed for us the dogmas and the doctrines of other faiths and because they were different they seemed implausible and passing strange. The ecumenical mood has forced us to take another look and to look beneath the surface, to seek the historical, the geographic and the cultural factors which made a particular denomination express their search for God and for meaning in particular terms and symbols and rites. Today we not only describe but ask why and wherefore? We have rediscovered the self-evident truth that there are many avenues to a deep and spiritually meaningful life. Consequently, the temperature of religious competitiveness has dropped a bit, though there is still a great deal of competition left. As the temperature of religious competition has dropped men have begun to realize the dignity and the worth-whileness of other commitments. Men have been moved to ask: 'Are the great religions of the West interchangeable?' 'Have we perhaps come to that point in time when we ought to do away with all the apparatus and the institutions of the traditional religions and create a new spiritual consensus which would void the barriers which still exist? In an age where it seems more important to believe than to believe a specific doctrine it is perhaps understandable that men are searching for consensus faiths and for the least common denominator of belief.

I find the advertisements which appear now and again in our press symbolic. You see a dome and a spire, the star of David and the Cross, church and synagogue, and a couple and their children about to enter an obviously ecclestial portal. Above them is the legend, "It doesn't matter where you worship, just be sure that you worship this week-end." When I see this advertisement, or one like it, I am often reminded of that wonderful folk tale of a kindly, wise, old sage, who was a bit overly generous in spirit. Perhaps you know it.

The scholar was seated in his study, surrounded by his books. All of a sudden the door blew open and a whirlwind of a woman came into the room pouring out as she came a litany of complaint about her husband. He abused her. He was violent. He was cruel to her. The sage listened quietly, and nodded comfortingly. Whenever she paused for a breath he would murmur, 'you are right, my dear, you are right.' Calmed, purged, released of her tension, the woman went home. She had hardly enough time at home to tell her husband that the Rabbi had approved her complaint, when this worthy burst through the Rabbi's door and before he could be asked to be seated, told a long, sad and brutal story of bitterness, of silence and abuse. Again the sage listened patiently. Again he nodded comfortingly, and again whenever there was a pause, the Rabbi would murmur, 'you are right, you are right.' Mollified, the husband left. But he left behind a very puzzled and bewildered secretary, who had heard both of these stories and the reassuring murmurs. He now turned to his master and said, 'My teacher, the husband and the wife told conflicting stories. Both could not possibly be right.' And the answer came. 'You are right too, my son.' She's right, he's right, and you're right too.

Among those who see the virtue of belief and are not overly concerned with the content of belief, it is easy to be agreeable. It is easy to be amiable. In such an age it is difficult to understand the impact of the Second Commandment, which says to us quite clearly, 'Beware. You may be wrong. He may be wrong. Indeed, the consensus of your age may be wrongly founded.'

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any manner of likeness of anything that is in the heavens above, or the earth beneath or the waters under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down to them nor serve them."

This Second Commandment which casts a parochial shadow before it, is only the most significant of the many laws in the Bible which deliberately separate the Jew from heathen religious practice and custom. A Hebrew might not build for himself an altar if it were suspected that this altar might be used for heathen sacrifices. If he found an altar built for heathen sacrifice he must pull it down stone by stone and plow the place under. He could not buy for himself a statuette which might once have been worshipped as an idol. If he were a sculptor he could not manufacture ikons which could be used for heathen worship. If he came across the sacred groves of the Canaanites, the Asherim, he would have to cut these down and burn up the trees for common fuel. Any act which was associated with any other religious worship was proscribed. The Hebrew could not consult necromancers nor oracles. He could not pile little stone upon little stone as the ancients did when they offered their petitions. He could not embalm his dead for this was a process of deification among the Egyptians. All that was foreign to the worship of the one God, all that was practiced in the worship of any other god was forbidden to the Hebrew on pain of death. Why so? Why was the religious spirit of the Jew determined to separate our ancestors from the easy accommodation and the rationalizations of tolerance, which were so common in the heathen world? Some have explained these laws as narrow ethnic parochialism. Our ancestors presumably were chauvenists and nationalists. Segregationist theology was merely a reflex of a segregationist sociology. Believing ourselves to be a chosen people we believed that we had a unique form of worship, which must be kept pristine, which could not be mingled with any other form of worship lest it be debased. This is sheer nonsense. Claptrap. However much our fathers may have been concerned with the purity of the worship of the one God; they were as concerned

with the fundamental prophetic category of humanity. All men are created in the image of God. Not just the Hebrew. "Have we not all one father. Has not one God created us all?" "There shall be one law for the home-born, and for the stranger that is within thy gates." It was the heathen philosopher not the Hebrew prophet who built high the walls between royalty and commonality, between citizen and alien, between Greek and barbarian, between free man and slave. Jewish law, Jewish philosophy, Jewish interest, knew none of these distinctions. Why then, did our sages deny to the Jew the easy justification that there is good in every cult, that it could not make a great deal of difference if we took a rite here and a colorful ceremony there and brought an Icon into the sanctuary now and again. The real explanation I believe lies in their astute observation, that outrageous beliefs lead to outrageous acts.

I read to you this morning from the 12th chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy. You may recall the concluding verse of that chapter: "For you shall not do, unto the Lord, thy God, according to all the abominations which they do unto their Gods, for these are the abominations which the Lord thy God hateth, even so do they cause their sons and daughters to be burnt unto their Gods." In the ancient world it made a great deal of difference whether you worshipped the all merciful, the one, or whether you worshipped the great fire god Moloch. Time and again at their holy season the worshippers of Moloch sacrificed a child, making him walk a bed of hot coals into the devouring maw of the underworld. It makes a great difference whether you worship the god of violence and of fire and destruction or whether you worship the (Hebrew) the one God, the gracious and merciful God whose only proper sacrifice is a humble and contrite heart.

Idolatry glorifies a part of the miracle of life; a part, and not the whole. Whenever a virtue is taken to excess, whenever it is not balanced with all other responsibilities, it becomes a vice - vulgar and excessive. Lacking the balanced-view, lacking a unitary view of the world, of the oneness of God, and the oneness of man, and the oneness of moral responsibility, the oneness of love, the oneness of wisdom, the oneness of concern, idolatry by its very definition, leads men to

excess, to vulgarity. Love is a virtue, love is a blessing. Love deified becomes lust. To worship a God of love is to dance ecstatically at Dionysian rites. Wisdom is a virtue. Wisdom is a blessing. Wisdom worshipped as the supreme Goddess of the Pantheon justifies intellectual arrogance, undermines democracy and forces the assumption that there are tyrants who know best. It was these tyrants who destroyed the democracy of the Greek city-state. It was Athens that worshipped Sophia.

All of us depend ultimately on the fecundity of the earth and the fullness of the harvest. In our worship we praise God. (Hebrew

) who has kept us alive and sustains us and on whose bounty we depend. Sustenance is one of the elemental relationships of life. But to worship a goddess of fertility, to worship fecundity, to make this the sole devotion of your cult, is to create a Bacchanalian ritual which conscripts young people as temple prostitutes so that they can mingle their seed and symbolically encourage and stimulate the fertilization of the seed in mother earth. Idolatry lacked balance. Every idol stood for a part of the miracle which is being. Lacking balance idolatrous worship inevitably became gross and excessive. It was only among our ancestors with their worship of the one God, that worship remained calm, a matter of moral challenge, a place for moral instruction and for quiet meditation, for the singing of gentle hymns and the raising to God of heartfelt and thoughtful prayer. It was only among our ancestors with their worship of the one God that men were able to create a ritual which could grace every spiritual season in a man's life; speak to him of all the confusions which surround him; offer him instruction out of this confusion; grace his life with dignity and create a worship which is now the common inheritance of all mankind.

We return to the Second Commandment. The Second Commandment speaks of idolatry. The Jews came to the Second Commandment because of their astute observation that outrageous beliefs lead to outrageous acts. Today it seems a matter of conventional wisdom that the great religions of the West are not outrageous in

their belief. All of the great religions of our Western world are rooted in the fundamental affirmations of our Bible. They are monotheistic. "I am the Lord thy God who brought thee out of the land of Egypt out of the house of bondage." As I created freedom for you, go now and create opportunity and freedom and justice for all mankind. And so it was that with the rise of Christianity, and somewhat later with the rise of Islam, our Rabbis began to insist that the laws of idolatry no longer regulate the relationship between Jew and Christian, between Jew and Moslem - our fellow-monotheists. We are encouraged to meet and to exchange ideas, to visit each other's holy places, to take part in common national observances. 'He who has given up idolatry,' the Talmud said, 'is as if he were a Jew.'

We return again to our question. Given the religions of the west, given the religions of the twentieth century, does it make any real difference at which altar we worship? And the answer must be: both, "yes" and "no!"

From the point of view of salvation, it makes little difference. No religion any longer may claim that it controls the keys to the kingdom. There are many ladders to heaven. There are many gates in heaven and there are many keys that fit these gates, but from the point of view of stimulation, of encouragement, from the perspective of the loftiness of a sacred vision, from the perspective of the surging thrust, the dynamism of moral teaching, there are differences between the religions of our world.

Let me speak of confidence and of arrogance. Confidence has built civilization. Arrogance again threatens to destroy all civilization. Confident men set out to discover what they could of the world in which we live. Arrogant men claim that their little scraps of knowledge are the deposit of truth and sanctify these into dogma: 'he who does not agree that this is the truth, the whole truth, the final truth, is in error, misguided, outside the pale.' The truth belongs to God alone. Only on rare occasions does a man glimpse a spark of the truth - only rarely is a shimmer of light grasped by a man of genius. Every religion is

by definition incomplete. Indeed, that is as it should be. Faith is not a statement of truth, but a search. Faith is a search for the nature of being. Faith is a search for the meaning of my being. Faith is a search for the direction life should take. Democritus said this years ago when he observed that: 'truth has been placed in the nethermost and deepest parts of the sea. All that we see of truth is a shimmer of some bright presence down deep below seen through the undulation and the opaqueness of the waves.' Job went further. The poet asks rhetorically: "Where is truth to be found?" "The deep sayeth, 'it is not in me.' The seas say, 'it is not in me.' " "Whence then, is the place of truth?" "Truth is hidden from the eyes of all the living. Truth is beyond the comprehension of all creatures." No man controls truth! All that we know is the tiniest bit, a scrap of the total wholeness of life. God's ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth so are His ways higher than our ways, and His thoughts than our thoughts.

Religions must be humble when they claim to be teaching the truth. Are there no differences between the religions of the west? Of course there are. There are religions that are based on credulity and fear and mystery - crass nonsense. There are religions that have ceased teaching and think only to preserve their prerogatives. There are religions which have ceased preaching, and seek only to make their peace with the status-quo. It is not so much that there is a great difference in the vision of the three monotheistic faiths of our world, but rather that within these faiths there are shrines and sanctuaries and holy places where a false image of God is projected and worshipped. Three thousand and more years before Dr. Freud our ancestors understood the mechanism of projection - that a privileged class will, almost without knowing it, project onto God the teachings of obedience and submission and that the under-privileged class will project upon God a mother figure who will assuage their pain and implant in God a violence which cannot be kept suppressed.

In America religion is monotheistic. There is not a shrine in America which does not have the label, 'this is the house of God, the one God, the only

God.' But in how many of those holy places is God a white man? In how many of those holy places is God a black man? There is not a place in the United States which does not have above its doors, 'the Lord is, the Lord is one.' In how many of these pulpits is it assumed that God prefers Americans to Russians, that God carries the banner of our armies in their relentless battles? There is not a sanctuary in this country where 'love thy neighbor as thyself' is not taught as the word of God. But in how many sanctuaries are men told that God consecrates the market place, bitterness and competition between men? Holy places and holy places of the ancients had a sanctum sanctora, a most sacred room in which the idol or the sacred image were kept. The Temple in Jerusalem had a sanctum sanctorum, a special room, called the Devir, the holy of holies, and in that place there was nothing. Emptiness. Only a sense of the ineffable presence of God. At the heart of our worship lies the truth that God is not here but everywhere. He is not only concerned with me but with all men. God not only loves this people Israel but all mankind. "Oh God where shall I find Thee, high and hidden is Thy place, and where shall I not find Thee? Thy glory fills all space."

What then does the Second Commandment teach us? That there is a worship that is proper and that there is a worship that is improper. That worship is proper which is the worship of the oneness, of the totality of the unity of God, of the oneness of mankind, of the unity of moral law... Any church, any synagogue, any mosque which fails to understand the interrelationship of all mankind, the interrelationship of all law and all justice, the interrelationship of all human duty and responsibility, fails to worship the one God. The prophet Ezekiel said it.: (Hebrew

) "These people, you and I, now and again take our false gods, our needs our ambitions, our prejudices into our hearts and sanctify them. The Second Commandment tells us to seek to purge your heart of the false God. Seek to

understand where you have created God in your own image, seek in what measure he is yours and in what measure he is his own. Seek in what measure you have made him consecrate your ideology, your private prejudice, and in what measure you serve His ideology, His first principles, His decisions for mankind.

"Thou **shalt** have no other Gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, nor any manner of likeness of anything that is in the heavens above or the earth beneath or the waters underneath the earth. Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor serve them."



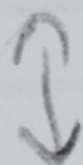
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