
CHAPTER ONE

God before Us



Whenever I get a call about a domestic dispute,” a police officer told a teen group I facilitated at church, “I ask Jesus to come with me and to stand between me and the couple, and also to stand between the couple themselves.”

“He is peace,” the cop explained, and being peace, his presence could only make a bad or threatening situation better. He confessed further, “I’ve gotten into the habit of making that same prayer whenever my wife and I start arguing, or me and my kids.”

The idea of asking Christ to stand between our difficulties and ourselves may seem quirky, at first. Isn’t God supposed to lead us? Aren’t we supposed to rely upon him to “do” for us? Well, yes and no. As Christians we believe in a God who is both infinitely above us, and, as our creator, also closer and more intimately connected to us than we are to ourselves. In times of difficulty, we do well to ask God to be *with* us, to strengthen us

so that we may draw on the gifts and resources already given us.

In asking God to be with him, this police officer got specific. “Come and stand between” is another way of saying, “stand among all of these flying things teeming about in this situation: the couple’s love that has become hurt, twisted, and chaotic; the ideas of espousal that have become warped and even dangerous; the anger held so dearly; the addictive need to be right. Stand among them and subdue them; stand before them in majesty so that your peace and your truth are unimpeded as we work through this difficulty.” Although not an academic theologian, the cop was, in my estimation, doing theology. He was instinctively obeying God’s command to the Israelites at Mount Sinai; namely, he was giving primacy to God in each situation he encountered. “You shall not have other gods besides me.” This meant no gods other than the God who had freed the Israelites, yes, but it meant something deeper as well. It meant inviting God’s presence—the living, breathing truth of who God is—to reside amid all of our thoughts, feelings, and actions, at all times.

To place anything—be it another deity or something more commonplace like romantic love, anger, ambition, or fear—before the Almighty is to give it preeminence in our regard. To become too attached to a thought or feeling or thing is to place it *between* God and ourselves. When we attach ourselves to something other than God, God’s presence is blocked, unseen, and disconnected from our awareness. The straight line

between creature and Creator is then impeded, and—as with most unwise detours—disorientation follows.

Why do people allow their relationship with God to become disoriented? Sadly, the problem usually starts with love. The human heart craves attention and love—love is the common longing of our lives. We may search for a career, or wealth, or status, but the desire to be loved and valued is usually at the root of our strivings. Finding this kind of love can be difficult. Giving love can be more difficult still. Sometimes, discouraged or impatient in our search, we chase illusions and yearn not for the give-and-take of a lifetime of sacrificial love but the fifteen minutes of fame Andy Warhol once predicted everyone would enjoy. Lacking loving relationships, we yearn instead for an audience. We're sure our allotment of attention, when it finally comes, will grow into something—that in our uniqueness we will shine with such a distinctive brightness that we will immediately be set apart from the rest of dull humanity, and love will follow.

It is not a bad thing to want to be loved; it is not a bad thing to have enough self-awareness to know who we are in the world and to desire personal excellence. Even a certain measure of ego and pride, if balanced by self-knowledge and humility, is not the worst thing. Ego and pride can push us to achieve excellence and a true sense of identity. But left unchecked or knocked out of balance, they can enslave us.

There is a great scene in the film *Moonstruck*, wherein a decent, dignified, middle-aged woman with a once loving but now unfaithful spouse finds herself eating supper in a restaurant with an attractive middle-aged

man she has noticed a few times before, usually in the company of beautiful women in their late twenties. He turns out to be an English professor, and he is not without intelligence, charm, and even some decency. But he is a little vain. Worse for him, he is clearly tired of his vanity, the egotistical version of himself that he offers to the world. His vanity has led him to feeling a fraud at his work and to engaging in a series of disastrous relationships with the younger women. He is now profoundly lonely.

In their conversation, it is clear that the professor longs for something more authentic, and he instinctively senses something real in the middle-aged woman. The woman, for her part, is a little worn out from knowing that her husband, whom she loves dearly, is being unfaithful. She accepts the professor's attention—but only to a point. As he walks her home, the man wonders if the woman might invite him in. When she refuses, he assumes there are other family members to consider. “No,” she says, “the house is empty. I can't invite you in because I'm married. And because I know who I am.” When he attempts to elicit sympathy from her, saying he's “a little cold,” she replies with perfect and friendly understanding, “You're a little boy, and you like to be bad.” It's a beautiful scene that addresses our craving for love. The man is trapped by his desire to be adored and thought important—he is trapped by illusions. To a degree even he knows it, but he is still trapped. The woman, although she is hurting and not completely immune to the professor's charms, is not trapped. She knows who she is and what love is.

It is not just our own hurts and egos that create illusions, of course. Illusions are out there, constantly on sale. Images and visions offered up by advertisers can keep us recklessly careening about in search of some elusive idea of perfection. When we listen to these voices, our pride and ego are neither acknowledged nor reined in. Rather they run wild, urging that we assert ourselves, pursue the notice of others—that we control our environments and even insert ourselves into conversations and life stories that are actually none of our business. We are encouraged in this by a culture that is over-connected, media saturated, and weirdly obsessed with the fake glamour of “reality” exhibitionism.

With our vision bedazzled by our fears, insecurities, egos—and all of the pretty people paraded before us wearing all the newest clothes and owning all the latest gadgets—our distractions cease to look like pale imitations of love, but instead, become reasonable facsimiles. The fascination and admiration of others is love, isn't it? Or close enough? It must be, because we know how much we ourselves are mesmerized by our favorite iThis and eThat and how much we love our favorite artist, our favorite politician, and our favorite sports figure. We can't get enough of our favorite website or our Twitter feed.

Convinced that what has enticed us unto obsession is about love, we gather it all unto ourselves. We become encased within it until the God who is the source and giver of all love, all reality, and all truth—who actually does see how distinctly each and every one of us glows because he willed it—is hidden from view. He's like a

forgotten gift, shoved to the back of a crowded mantel, which is crammed with shiny, empty things.

And yet, in those rare moments when we find ourselves alone and the gadgetry silent, we feel we are at a loss. With nothing to distract us, we come face to face with a keening emptiness. The void we thought to fill with noise and superficial friendships and tinkery things presents itself to us in a resounding echo. Silence is then terrifying, but only because it lays bare our loneliness, our self-recriminations, and our doubts. Possessing nothing that is equal to those depths, we sense the need to distract ourselves and the cycle begins to churn again.

If we are wise, we will come to recognize the illusions both within and without that attempt to trap us, and ask God to come between them and us. We will ask God to help us remember who we are. If we are foolish, God will often come to us anyway, in dramatic, not always easy-to-understand ways that force us to focus. No wonder, as my aunt used to say, “God will often write straight with crooked letters,” in the learning curve of our lives.

I can say all this with such offensive certainty because I, too, create and give in to illusions every single day, as does just about everyone I know. Our shared humanity, broken since Eden, makes unwitting and constant collaborators in illusion of us all. We may take some comfort in the fact of our commonality—let’s face it, all of our weaknesses seem less glaring when they are shared—but should we shrug our failings off as being mere human nature? Ought we to be so complacent about how willing we are to create illusions by the

shelf-full? It's a serious question but one that our era does not take seriously—mostly because it does not recognize illusion-chasing for what it is—idolatry.

When our modern culture deigns to entertain a notion of idolatry at all, it confines the notion to a few verses of Exodus and the pop-culture excesses of teenage girls. Anyone taking seriously the question of whether we have set ourselves up for idolatry will surely be dismissed as someone unfathomably naïve, or a goofy religious fanatic, or both. What does it even mean, to put something “before God,” and why would it matter to God, anyway? He's God! How insecure and needy and manipulative could God be to even make such a command?

It matters because of love—not the human love we know, which is too often so needy, insecure, and manipulative that we have no difficulty projecting these attributes on to the Creator, but the supernatural love that springs from a source that is nothing but love. “You have made us for yourself, O Lord,” wrote Saint Augustine, “and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

The command against idolatry comes early in the Ten Commandments. If we take the commandments seriously, we will recognize that, far from being a contentious list of outmoded rules, they are in fact a primary channel by which we may find that rest and peace of which Augustine speaks. The commandments may be described as “a couple of things we won't do unless we have to, followed by more things we will surely do, unless we're told in no uncertain terms that we can't.”

God, understanding our self-interested natures better than we do, first sets up proper relationships: Love God, have no other gods, keep the Sabbath holy, and honor your parents. God then gives commandments meant to save us from ourselves: Don't kill, don't debase yourself or others, don't steal, don't lie or gossip, and don't covet. To modern ears—particularly those of a perpetually adolescent bent—the Ten Commandments seem a tiresome bit of parental finger wagging, an Almighty scold of no, no, no, offered to creatures inclined toward the pursuit of yes in all things.

Perhaps that is the reason the list includes the commandment to “honor thy father and thy mother,” which can strike us as oddly personal and sometimes a difficult notion, to boot. Why does *that* matter? It matters because our parents are often the models and means by which we fix our notions of God—sometimes for our whole lives. If we are lucky enough to have had loving, generous parents, an exhortation to “honor” them can sound like a no-brainer. For those of us raised with difficult parental situations, however, the commandment can immediately turn us off from seeking out a trusting relationship with God. This happens most particularly if we have already made a kind of deity of our hurt and anger toward them and have grown comfortable honoring those emotions. The point is to “honor” our parents as purposeful pieces of God's plans for us, but not to make gods of them out of love or godlings from our hurt. As Rabbi Simon Jacobson explains:

It's not about your relationship with your parents, it's about your relationship with

your life . . . honoring your parents is like [God] telling you to honor the life that was given to you, even if your parents were almost incidental, or if they did everything possible to crush that life . . . the life is still there. Should you dishonor the life, you will become not only a victim of your parents but you will continue to loathe yourself and dishonor G-d and your own soul.¹

Our parents are not always—or even usually—cognizant of the fact they are modeling God for us, but as children we seek from them our sustenance and our love, and if our needs are perfectly met in them, we have no particular desire to steal, kill, covet, and so forth. Unfortunately, no parent is perfect—our parents' parents weren't either—and each of us carries into our adult lives our individual voids and bare spots. We have lacked perfection since the original sin of Eden, and through millennia God has been intent on reclaiming and restoring us to himself, the source where all of our needs are truly met.

We encounter a huge part of that reclamation effort within the direct communication drawn by God and delivered by Moses, but what we seldom realize is this: all of the commandments are simply an expansion of the very first commandment—the one about gods and idols. This command is given primacy not because the Creator is insecure and in need of constant attention, but because it is the one commandment that, if obeyed, renders all of the others quite nearly moot. Were we not continually making idols of the objects of our desire—all of those shiny things we cannot resist grabbing on