

THE RICHEST OF FARE

[Read Exodus 20:1-6]

The First Commandment contains a fearful threat and a gracious promise.

God loves us and wants to give us everything we need to be perfectly happy, but if we rebel against Him and break His commands, we will bring down a host of miseries upon ourselves, our children and their children.

Obedience sounds like a no-brainer, but people consistently choose to rebel.

The question is: why?

Why do we do this?

What *is* there in us that causes us to choose rebellion and misery rather than receive the blessings of a loving God?

The answer, of course, is *sin*.

Sin, convinces us that we know better than God what is good for us.

Sin, like a malignant cancer, attacks and kills everything it touches.

If there is any doctrine of the Bible that has been empirically confirmed throughout history it is that human beings are sinful.

Man's inhumanity to man dominates the history of mankind.

The media loves reporting it and we love hearing about it.

There is a saying among those who work in the media about news reportage: "If it bleeds, it leads."

Human beings do awful things to each other for the simple reason that they are naturally prone to do such things.

According to philosophers like Thomas Hobbes and Jacques Rousseau, the original reason men established government was to control people's tendency to hurt each other.

By making and laws and punishing those who break them they hope to deter people from sinning against each other.

The endemic nature of man's sinfulness is vividly portrayed by the author William Golding in his popular novel of the late 1950's: *Lord of the Flies*.

It is a story about a group of English choirboys who are passengers on an airplane that crashes on a small, uninhabited island.

The adults on board are all killed in the crash and the boys are left alone to manage by themselves.

In the absence of any controlling authority the boys quickly abandon all restraints and revert to barbarism.

They begin to pretend that there is a beast on the island seeking to hunt them down and kill them.

They play that they need supernatural help to protect them from the beast, kill a wild pig, stick its head on a pole and pretend to worship it, asking it to shield them from the beast.

As a joke they call it “Beelzebub”—a Hebrew word which means “lord of the flies” and is one of the titles given to Satan in the *Old Testament*.

They even mockingly pray to their lord of the flies, asking it to protect them from the beast, but their pretend fear becomes real fear and they begin to resort to barbaric behavior.

They split into two mutually hostile groups, each group believing that the other one is in league with the beast and they begin to hunt down and kill one another.

Finally, one of the boys realizes what is happening and says to another boy: *“There really is a beast on this island. The beast is us.”*

Finally a naval gunboat arrives which has been sent to rescue the boys.

When the captain of the boat comes ashore and sees what the boys have done to each other he reproves them, saying: “You should have made a better show of it.”

Ironically, behind him offshore, floats the gunboat.

Man is born with a beast in him, a sinful nature he inherited from his parents which resents God's authority and urges us to "go our own way."

Each of us nurses the private knowledge that we are guilty before God, that we have not lived up to what we should be.

There is an old saying that goes "Never tell anyone else your troubles because half of them don't care and the other half are glad you have them.

It's a cynical saying, but our consciences tell us that there is truth in it.

Unless we are pure sociopaths, we inwardly hate the fact that we sin and we also hate the fact that no matter how hard we try, we continue to do so.

We want to shake this feeling of guilt, of being somehow out of tune with our better nature, but we don't know how.

We long to stop sinning and have inner peace.

And this desire to shed our feeling of guilt and receive inner peace is a God-given thing that is called *repentance*.

Repentance is the remorse we feel over the sins we've committed accompanied by the desire to stop committing them.

And when we experience this repentance we can turn in either of two ways.

One way is a blessing; the other way is a disaster.

One way will lead us to our Savior; the other will cast us into the arms of the greatest con-man in history: our enemy Satan who is the real lord of the flies.

The schoolboys chose the disastrous way: they set up an idol to protect them from “the beast.”

Many people follow their example.

They may not stick a pig’s head on a pole and bow down to it, but they set up idols to worship and serve—believing that they will give them what they want.

Some worship money and convince themselves that more and more money will satisfy them.

But it doesn’t

Some make an idol out of sex and persuade themselves that giving free reign to their lust will satisfy their sexual appetites.

But it doesn’t.

The glutton imagines that eating more and more will satisfy his appetite.

It doesn’t.

The angry man convinces himself that giving vent to his rage will bring him peace.

It doesn't.

Such people imagine—against the testimony of their own experience—that serving their idol is the only way to keep it under control.

That more money satisfies greed; that fornication or pornography satisfy lust; that more food satisfies gluttony; that temper tantrums placate anger.

They forget—or choose not to remember—that idols don't satisfy sinful appetites: they inflame them.

More money only creates the desire for more money.

Pornography feeds the desire for more pornography and sexual license produces the desire for more sex.

More food feeds the desire for even more food.

Fits of rage inflame anger rather than placate it.

Idols don't reward us for serving them; they turn on us and devour us.

They lead a man led down the path to misery, despair and death.

To save us from this fate God has attached a powerful warning to the First Commandment.

He warns us that if we look to idols rather than to Him to find peace and happiness we follow a path which will lead to our self destruction.

It will not only lead US to self destruction, it will tempt—and even encourage—our children to follow the same path and end up destroying themselves as well.

There is strong sociological evidence that vices like greed and sexual promiscuity and gluttony and unbridled rage on the part of parents breed a tendency to the same vices in children.

But God also attaches a gracious promise to the First Commandment as well.

If we place our hopes for peace and happiness in Him and only Him, and strive to faithfully follow the path he lays out for us in the rest of the commandments, He will not only bless us with peace but draw our children and their children to follow the same path.

For these reasons Luther believed that the First Commandment summarized God's entire moral law.

That if we heed God's warning and promise of blessing in the First Commandment He will help us obey the rest of the Commandments and lead us down the path to joy and peace.

This is why God calls Himself a “jealous God”: He loves and cherishes His children and hates the idols they set up in their imagination which draw his children away from Him.

He knows that the idols are the work of Satan, that they appeal to our sinful natures and that they have the power to deliver us into misery and death.

There’s an old Humphrey Bogart movie that you’re probably familiar with called *The Maltese Falcon*.

Bogart plays a private detective named Sam Spade who is hired by a beautiful woman to find her husband’s murderer.

As it turns out, her husband was involved in a search for a solid gold statue of a falcon that men had been searching for down through the ages.

Convinced that the maltese falcon would bring them fabulous wealth they were led to do almost anything to possess it.

The falcon had left a trail of carnage in its wake as men schemed and plotted and lied and killed to make it their own.

Finally the falcon is found, but it turns out to be a fake.

It is made of lead rather than gold and all the scheming and conniving and plotting and killing have been in vain.

When a policeman asks Sam Spade at the end of the movie what actually IS the maltese falcon, anyway?" he answers: *"The stuff that dreams are made of."*

What a perfect example of an idol!

It promises life and happiness and delivers suffering and death.

And those three things await all those who abandon faith in God's love and provision and place their hopes in idols.

Sin, misery and death.

That is why Gods warns us so strongly against serving other gods in His First Commandment.

It is also why he promises such wonderful things to those who place their hopes in him and who strive to follow Him wherever he leads them.

While He threatens to punish up to three or four generations of those who hate Him, He promises to show love to a thousand generations of those who love him.

His grace transcends His wrath so far that we cannot out-sin His willingness to forgive.

Paul wrote, *"Where sin did abound, grace did super-abound...for neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation can*

separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!”

God’s love in Jesus Christ reaches to the very end of creation itself.

He promises nothing but good to those who trust in His love and strive to follow the path He has laid out for them.

How do we do this?

First of all we rely on Jesus Christ to save us from our sins, for as Jesus said, *“The work of God is to believe in the One He has sent.”*

Second, we persist in this reliance, this faith, in spite of all the troubles and disappointments this world places in our path.

And God will help us do this by strengthening our faith with spiritual food.

And what exactly is this spiritual food?

It’s His Word which teaches us the truth and keeps us free from believing falsehood.

It’s divine service every Sabbath where we confess our sins and receive His forgiveness.

It’s receiving the body and blood of His Son which strengthens our relationship with Him and with our fellow saints.

It's spending time with Him in prayer each and every day where he enriches our lives and blesses us in our faith journey.

It's allowing Him to create in us the mind of Christ.

This is what Isaiah is referring to when he says, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Why spend money on what is not bread and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good and your soul will delight in the richest of fare! Give ear and come to me; hear me that your soul may live!" (Isaiah 55:1-3)

When we hear and read the Word of God in the Scriptures and discern the love of Jesus Christ in it, we are eating the bread of heaven.

When we eat and drink the Word of God in the sacrament of the altar, we are dining on manna from heaven, the medicine of immortality, which nourishes us to eternal life.

An idol has the power to devour all the sacrifices we offer it until we have nothing left to sacrifice.

Then it turns and devours us.

God's love in Jesus Christ has the power to cast down all idols, deliver us from their control, and give us eternal life.

The grace of God, the love of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with you all.

Amen.