



# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *How Christianity Forgot God's Name*

### *“Part 8: Imago”*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
April 14, 2024

**Scripture Reading:** Mark 12:13-17 (*Inclusive Bible*)

*Some Pharisees and Herodians were sent after Jesus to catch him in his speech. The two groups approached Jesus and said, “Teacher, we know you are truthful and unconcerned about the opinion of others. It is evident you aren't swayed by another's rank, but teach God's way of life sincerely. So: is it lawful to pay tax to the emperor or not? Are we to pay or not to pay?” Knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, “Why are you trying to trick me? Let me see a coin.” When they handed him one, he said to them, “Whose image and inscription do you see here?” “Caesar's,” they answered. Then Jesus said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's” This reply took them completely by surprise.*

### Sermon

Good job reading, but it sounds like you got something against the Herodians to me. *[laughter]*

Now, that was good, getting the hypocrisy in scripture, clergy in the Christian Testament, clergy are almost always the bad guys. So, just trying to give you a warning.

By the way, during the Sunday school hour this morning, we had a rare opportunity to hear from an author, D. L. Day, who was very important to me. When I graduated from seminary, I had no idea of the privileges that I had. I didn't understand that I had white privilege, male privilege, Christian privilege, heterosexual privilege. And, it wasn't that I was a bad person, but I'd just been born standing on other people's throats, and I didn't know it.

There was another author at the time, a Dr. Daniel A. Helminiak, who had a book in 1994, but not too many people were writing books on the Bible and homosexuality. But D. L. Day was working in this area at that time. And D.L. Day has agreed to teach this month, and he did a great thing on “*Dominionism*” today. But if you're wondering about how the Church went crazy, how

it can get sane again, this is a great series for you. So, you're welcome there or online to visit that.

That's kind of the topic of this sermon series. We're looking at things that fell out of Christianity over the centuries. We've looked at a number of things so far. We looked at things like the Name, which is that's the First Commandment. Let's look at the slide there.



This is a masterful symbol that's kind of been completely lost, where Moses, representing every human being in the world, sees either a magic bush, in which case I'm not interested [*laughter*], or he sees an ordinary bush from a mystical point of view. That there's something miraculous about life itself, about "being" itself. And he hears a name "I am," but it is the verb "to be." So, it could be "I am," "you are," "we are," that kind of thing. In some reckonings of the Ten Commandments, that's the First Commandment. So, it's a tragic mistake to start off with "*no other gods before me*". Right, so come on, we've got our dukes up. We don't know who God is, but we're willing to fight.

So, we're going to look at the Second Commandment today. The problem is they're not numbered. So, different denominations number them differently, and they don't realize that. So, when people want to impose the Ten Commandments into the public sphere, they don't realize, well, you've got to choose which of the flavors. So, let's go to the next slide.

Exodus 20:3-5 KJV

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments."

Now, this is a kind of disturbing commandment when we first look at it. So, we're going to unpack it. I promise you we're going to unpack it, or at least try to. I chose King James, because I thought that sounded more religious. [laughter] Yes, sir. We've got some pagans on the front row. Okay.

I'll say it in modern English though.

*"You shall have no other gods before me."*

Now, remember, you've already seen the Prologue, which is a story of rescue. They've been saved from slavery. So, the Ten Commandments are not rules for obedience, they're principles of liberation. Liberation theology is right. And then the First Commandment is this mystical experience. Some of you had it this week with the eclipse. Nobody can tell you what that is, but it may be the ocean or looking at the stars or looking at a baby or being with somebody when they're dying. Something strikes you. You don't have to have theology at all. You don't have to believe in God, but there's something really sacred. Something that triggers reverence.

Now, the second thing is that requires an elevated consciousness when that happens. So, you have to realize that when you return to your ordinary consciousness, you can't just use the same phrases. There has to be artful shaping of it. In this case, the story takes place on a mountain. In the mystical literature of the world, that means you're broadening your horizons. This is something from an elevated point of view. You can't live like this all the time. When you're moved, that's a wonderful thing, but you can't live like that all the time. And you have to realize when you come back down to your regular conscience that you can't just use the same insights. Particularly, you can't reduce the transcendent to your 'sense' images.

The Second Commandment is *"Do not worship your image of the sacred."* That's different than you're probably used to. Let's look and see if you agree with that.

*"Thou shalt not make any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that's in the earth beneath or that's in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them nor serve them, for I am thy God. I'm your God. I'm a jealous God"*, which can also be translated 'zealous'. If God is jealous, that means there's other gods. Right? You know, and if there aren't other gods and God is jealous, then somebody needs counseling. This is the problematic one. We'll come back to that.

*"Visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children until the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my Commandments."*

It's almost like awareness itself is speaking. Right? Forget theology for a moment. Bad religion is not a victimless crime. When you fall into bad religion, it doesn't just mess up your life. It hurts the people you know. It damages your children. It's abusive. It traumatizes people, and it ripples across time and space. So, this is, I think, an important warning.

Again, in the story, Moses represents your soul. You're looking to make sense of life. You go up a mountain, it broadens your horizons. You see the fire kind of stuff. And my favorite part of the story, it's one of the best storytelling devices I know of. He comes down from the mountain, he throws a tantrum, and breaks the tablets. The storyteller is telling you don't take this literally.

You don't know what happened on the mountain. You got kind of some footprints and this kind of stuff. But you're going to have to find this truth in your life. You don't know what happened up on the mountain with Moses. You're going to have to be your own Moses. You're going to have to climb your own mountain.

One of my favorite presidential candidates of all time was a socialist. Tells you where I am politically. He ran for President from prison, because he opposed war, and they did the Insurrectionist Act. Eugene Debs ran from prison, and he said,

*"I don't want to be your Moses. If I can lead you into the promised land, somebody else can lead you out of it."*

He wanted the workers of the world to lead themselves, to empower themselves. That sounds to me more like Jesus than what I learned in Sunday school. You can decide what works for you.

I love Anne Lamott's comment.

*"You know you've created a God in your own image when your God hates all the same people you do."* [laughter]

So, the idea of religion is not to get God to do what you want, but to use the symbol God. God is a symbol of this unspeakable state of mind that you sometimes get into. If the symbol doesn't work for you, you don't need it. That's not what's important. The important thing is to be struck with reverence before life, in the life process, to say 'yes' to the life process. That's what a healthy religion is trying to do.

Again, bad religion is not a victimless crime. So, I understand the Second Commandment to be like the windshield wipers of the spiritual life. Don't trust religion. Don't trust clergy. Keep questioning. Keep exploring. Because it's not about your 'sense' impressions. It's not about your beliefs, literal stuff. It's about awareness. It's about interconnectedness. It's about compassion.

I personally believe that idolatry is not condemning statues of Buddha for Christians. I believe that's the easy way out to say, "Don't have other people's religion with you." I think the three greatest idols in America today are people's image of Jesus, people's image of the Bible, and people's image of the Church itself. Would that not be the idol? Our image of what the sacred means is where the problem is going to come from. How can Jesus be a problem? Well, let's look at the little parable that's here. Can we look at the next slide?



Okay, in this story, the Herodians, which were parodied so well in the reading, are going to try to trap Jesus. The way they're going to do it is an either-or kind of thing. If Jesus says you do pay the taxes, he's going to lose the support of the people. He's going to seem like he's a sellout. If he says, don't pay taxes, they'll go straight to the authorities, and he's doomed. It's a great trap.

One of the things about right wing religion is it's great at mousetraps. Little verbal things that trap you. And the problem is when you're a mystic and a universalist, the mousetrap is too small. You don't fit in it. So, Jesus says, bring me the coin. Show me whose image is on it. They say the image of Caesar. And he says,

*"Render to Caesar, what is Caesar's. Render to God, what is God's."*

Now, as far as traditional Christianity, it ends there. But in terms of mysticism and the mystery religions, there's a huge unanswered part of the puzzle. I've never seen this in a commentary, so don't put a lot of weight on this. But doesn't that paradox, whose image is on the coin, leave unanswered whose image is God on? *[murmuring]* Right? Render to God, what is God's? Render to Caesar, what is Caesar's? Where do you find the image of God? On human beings... in the Jewish culture.

So, Jesus is making a call to revolution. He's saying that you do not belong to Caesar. Your money does. The army does. The implements of empire belong to empire. But you belong to compassion, to love, to justice. So, you need not to cooperate with the oppression of other people.

The word "church" means "called out." That's kind of been lost, too. We need to look at that. It's a call to be countercultural. The word "protestant" used to mean "to protest." We sold out big time, right? We're playing golf with the President now.

Jesus is a symbol that stands for the fact that you are the image of God. Everything Jesus is doing, in my opinion, is trying to lead you to your own heart. You don't follow Jesus by worshiping him. It brings nothing to the world for you to worship Jesus. You can stay exactly the same. You can serve the empire and worship Jesus, but you can't do that and *be like* Jesus. What Jesus represents is a fully blossoming human being. You're going to be different than Jesus, but you're the same word, you're the same image that's there, that's uniquely different.

Remember this whole set of what we call Commandments are not really commandments. They're principles of freedom and liberation. So, the symbol of Jesus is intended to free you. Have you ever heard the saying from Buddhism where *"if you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him?"* I wasn't going to say that. What it means is if you ever see the transcendent in concrete form, stop. Right, the transcendent isn't that. It's everywhere. If you think it's somewhere, that's a problem. If you think the source of everything is manifest for you to see and to turn into an object that's comfortable to hold in your hand, then you're lost. I've said from day one, if you're following me, you're already lost. I don't have to say that anymore, because you figured it out. The man's incompetent. *[laughter]*

In a few moments, we're going to have Communion together, if you're comfortable. You don't have to if you don't feel like it. But what do you think it means really to eat Jesus? What do you

think that really means? We've looked at it from different viewpoints, but don't you think that means to take it in, to integrate it, to become it? Again, I think what the symbol of Jesus, if you want to make it an idol, you worship it. If you want to make it an icon, it tells you what it means to be human in the Cosmos, in the universe.

The second idol, I think, that haunts the Church is the Bible. You don't believe in symbols; you perceive through the symbols. You hold the symbols up to your life, and you become aware of dynamics that are not easy to see. But have you ever known anybody that became religious, and they couldn't see you anymore? Happens a lot. Somebody's beliefs are so strong, they can't see anything anymore. That kind of religion is 'cataracts for the soul'. So, let me show a different understanding standing here.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>namaste'</b> { nah-mas- tay } My soul honors your soul. I honor the place in you where the entire universe resides. I honor the light, love, truth, beauty &amp; peace within you, because it is also within me. In sharing these things We are united, we are the same, We are one.</p>
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Have you seen that word? Namasté. It's Buddhist, but I think that's what the symbols of the other are, the symbols of the neighbor, loving everyone, including even your enemy. *"My soul honors your soul."* See, I've realized that I'm the image of God. Now I've got to see that in you. Or I'm just trapped in my ego.

*"My soul honors your soul. I honor the place in you where the entire universe resides. I honor the light, love, truth, beauty, and peace within you, because it is also within me. In sharing these things, we are united, we are the same, we are one."*

I ran across a really striking phrase this week, and I couldn't find the author. I found like thirty people that claimed to be the author, but I couldn't find the real one. But it said, *"Your nervous system will prefer a familiar hell to an unfamiliar heaven."* Your nervous system will prefer a familiar hell to an unfamiliar heaven. Have you ever been unhappy, and you didn't want anybody to shake up the mood, you're in a really good funk, and somebody's trying to make you happy? No, no, no, no, no. Our nervous system sometimes prefer the adverse.

So, in the story, when the tablets are broken, that's shattering the images. The windshield wipers. It's like realizing that what you're looking for is not belief, you're looking for awareness, for relatedness. Belief does not equal love. You can have all kinds of beliefs and not love anybody. So, this is a call to see the person there, even if they're completely different, to realize the image of God is also there, in your friends and in your enemies. So, the second part of liberation is getting beyond the ego and realizing this is a lot bigger than I am.

Let's see. Then finally, the third idol is the Church. And that's the idea of this gated community or the chosen people or the righteous ones, who are somehow mandated to judge other people. Although Jesus said, "Don't judge, don't judge, don't judge, don't judge, don't judge, don't judge, don't judge, don't judge." The Church is not God's favorite people. The Church is a group of people, who have come together in community to consecrate themselves to the service of the whole. Doesn't matter if it's Christian. But people, who live intimately together in covenant, who dedicate their lives to the service of all others; that's what I think is the 'true Church'.

Have you ever seen those "Circle of Life" things? Do you remember like the "*Lion King*"? If you saw that, and you were watching the thing of the Circle of Life, you thought that makes more sense than anything you ever heard in church. We understand that with animals. We understand that with insects. We don't have any problem saying, you got the egg, you got the caterpillar, you got the larva, caterpillar, butterfly. But for some reason with human beings, we can't do that. We fall in love with the caterpillar, and we can't let go.

You are part of a larger life. Every person that you meet is a life in transition. We're all becoming something better, not necessarily better, but bigger, and we're all part of the common life. Lots of the symbols of Christianity are actually cosmic. I'm going to show you an image from Easter, which I think is about the life process, the cosmic process.



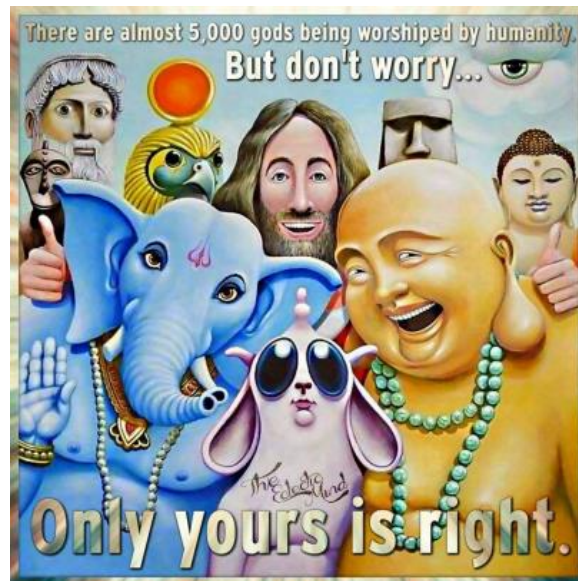
And I want you to look at this picture of the empty grave and see if it reminds you of anything that happened this last week. Could we? Okay, in these symbols, this is Jesus goes up in the sky. That's the individual disappearing into the transcendent. But being lifted in the sky means you see it everywhere now. Next one. Here we go.



Does that remind you of anything that happened recently in your life? John, the imagery that he does is very cosmic. And that idea of the stone rolling away, and this light coming out of it. It's not about religion, it's about life. But we need some kind of a scaffold to hold that together. It's very hard to be spiritual on our own. It's very hard to be spiritual if we don't have a practice and a discipline, and this kind of thing. So, symbols like this are intended to remind us of how we felt when we saw totality, if you were lucky enough to see it.

But it's saying if you've loved someone and lost them. It's saying if you yourself feel like you're dissipating. And if it hasn't happened yet, hold on. Traditional Christianity is not very helpful when you're dying. It just fills you with fairy tales. I was with a man, who was dying a couple of weeks ago, and he was trying to be Christian about it, but I knew he'd had a Buddhist past. I knew that he had meditated. So, I asked him about that. And I said, "Does it feel at all like meditation, what's happening right now?" That you're dissolving into whatever it is that you came out of. And this look of peace swept across his face. And then he said, "*the sweetest sleep of ever.*" The sweetest sleep of ever.

The symbols of religion are not self-contained. They mean nothing as long as they're just symbols. Do they bring you to yourself? Do they help you recognize the other? Do they open you to all of life? I ran across one more picture that I really liked. [laughter] There we go.



*There are almost 5,000 gods being worshiped by humanity. But don't worry, only yours is right.* That's not what the Second Commandment says. If it is, who cares? The greatest idolatry in America today is happening on Sunday mornings in churches. We have to realize that. Bad religion is not a victim of supply. So, we have to be better at the religion that calls us to love. Instead of worshiping Jesus, we have to allow that symbol to speak to us from the inside out. And we find what is Christ-like about us. He's loving and kind.

When we take up the Bible, we have to end forever the idea that we're supposed to believe in what's written in those pages. We're supposed to hold those images up to our life and see if we



recognize patterns. Some of that stuff is crazy, but some of it's really helpful in entering into that cosmic dance, and gives us a vocabulary where we can share life together. Then finally, to not see Church as something that limits us, but gives us kind of a nest from which to serve the whole and to eventually to dissolve into the whole.

I want to close with a reading that kind of came up this morning. Hopefully, it wraps it up. If not, you get your money back. The jar is over there.

*“Life is change. Life is transition. The river of life has given you everything. And the river of life will take everything from you. When you lose someone you love, remember that they and you belong to the river. When all is said and done, they and you are the river. Life is as beautiful as it is painful, but we must learn to let go of the caterpillar so that the butterfly might be born.”*

Well, that's my understanding of this text. We'll take a moment, as always, for you to think about how you understand it.

## Benediction

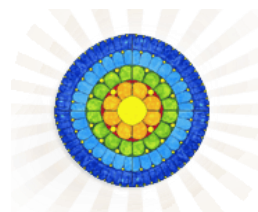
Dr. Jim Rigby

I think the Second Commandment is a reminder that religion isn't an end in itself, but I think it can be very helpful to have friends, to have a time that you get together and meet things. Symbols can be important as long as we don't take them literally. I hope the symbol Jesus leads you to your own true self. If Jesus doesn't work, that you find another symbol that helps you live life from inside out and realize that you are a gift to the world. You are the image of the sacred, and that that love will grow to include other people, and you'll begin to recognize whatever it is you consider to be sacred in friends and strangers and enemies, even. Then finally, that you'll realize that your real life belongs to that Circle of Life, and that even if life is sometimes unfair for us personally, that we all bring this tremendous gift to change the world.

## Rev. Babs Miller

Each of you is a child of that wonderful spirit of love that we sometimes call God. And that spirit knows when you skin your knee or your heart. That spirit knows when you admire a butterfly or cry in the darkness. So go out into this wonderful creation and tell the whole world that they are loved just exactly as they are. Go and kiss the hurts of this world. Go and laugh and play in the fields of grace and love. Go in peace. Amen.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*



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