

BE INFORMED ABOUT GOD**EXODUS 20:4-6**

Have you ever heard of MTD? It stands for something called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. That's a phrase created by two sociologists who released a study on the religious and spiritual beliefs of American teenagers back in 2005. Here's how they defined MTD. 1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth. 2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. 3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. 4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem. 5. Good people go to heaven when they die. (Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*)

Here's why it's called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Deism is the belief God is out there somewhere in the great beyond, but He's uninvolved and unconcerned with our lives. It's moralistic because it's thought God simply wants us to be good people overall. Personal goodness gets us into Heaven. "Good" is really defined by popular culture rather than anything in the Bible. Therefore, tolerating behaviors the Bible calls sin might be seen as "good" while calling those behaviors "sin" might be seen as intolerant or hateful, which is bad. It's therapeutic because it's also believed the ultimate goal is to feel happy in life. This is how you define what is "good." It's whatever makes you happy. MTD is not an official religion. Probably no one will ever stand up and say, "Yeah, I'm a Moralistic Therapeutic Deist." But I submit to you that MTD reflects the dominant spiritual beliefs of the majority of Americans. Not just young Americans. All Americans. Something else, too. I suspect all too many people who attend church would look at that list of MTD's five core beliefs and, more or less, agree with them. What's especially interesting is the picture of God that emerges from MTD. Someone put it into cartoon form referred to it as the Mush God.

Last week, we began a message series entitled "The Big Ten." No, it's not about a well-known athletic conference. It's about the Ten Commandments – God's Big Ten. They are authoritative statements of truth from God Himself that apply to everyone everywhere every day. They're not suggestions or opinions. Instead, they're God's loving instruction intended to enrich and enhance our lives not restrict or diminish them. There's value in reading all ten of them today. Now last week we considered the first of God's Big Ten. "You must not have any other god but me." (Ex. 20:3 NLT). We thought about the importance of being absolutely loyal to the one, true God. Put God first and keep God first. Today, we want to drill down on the second of God's Big Ten. Let's read it again in Exodus 20:4-6. To put it differently, it's very important to be rightly informed about the one, true God. If you believe the wrong information about God, you're headed for disaster. If you hold on to the right information about God and live by it, you're headed for godly success in life. Let's unpack that idea for a few minutes. Be informed – rightly informed – about God. Today's message is about two choices each of us make in life. Here's the first one:

WILL I WORSHIP THE GOD OF BIBLICAL REVELATION OR HUMAN IMAGINATION?

The second commandment is about not making an idol. What's the difference between that and the first commandment - not worshiping any other god? I like very much how Thomas Watson, a 17th century Puritan, put it, "In the first commandment worshiping a false god is forbidden. In this, however, the second commandment, worshiping the true God in a false manner is forbidden." Yes, idolatry can be about carving a stone or twisting a piece of metal into a literal figurine and bowing down before it. But idolatry is bigger than worshiping false gods. It can also be about believing an idea about the one, true God that's false. Idolatry can be resorting to our own imagination and preferring it to what the Bible says about God. It attempts to create a God made in our own image.

The fact is we don't have to imagine who God is because God has revealed who He is in Scripture. Take the Mush God of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as an example. MTD imagines that, "A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth." Mush God can speak through Buddha, Allah, Krishna as well as good, decent people everywhere. He may have spoken through Jesus of Nazareth as well, but not exclusively. Biblical revelation, however, says not just "a god" exists, but the God who has revealed Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In addition, whoever doesn't receive Jesus as God doesn't receive God. Secondly, MTD imagines that "God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions." Mush God is morally fuzzy and agrees with the premise that the ultimate definition of what's "good" is whatever makes you feel good. Biblical revelation, however, informs us God is the One who gets to define what's "good" and "nice." He commands us to obey Him. He calls sin "sin" and promises to judge it.

The third core belief of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is stated this way: "The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself." When Oprah Winfrey had her talk show, she once had a program with people who were currently having affairs with married people. One woman who had a long-standing affair with a married man was telling everyone how happy she was. Someone in the audience raised the question of her morality. The woman protested, "Wait just a minute. I am a Christian, but my personal life and my religion don't have anything to do with one another. God wants me to be happy, and if I'm happy with this man, then God doesn't mind." Biblical revelation, however, informs us the central goal of life is to give glory to God. A by-product may be that we feel good about ourselves, but that's not the goal.

A fourth belief of MTD says "God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem." Mush God exists to serve us and meet our needs. His purpose is to protect us, bless us, make us happy, and solve our problems. His job is to provide food, shelter, clothes, a good job, a healthy body, great sex, and a comfortable retirement. He doesn't demand commitment, loyalty, obedience, or allegiance of any kind. He's very content with lip service. He never demands to be first in your life. You can take him or leave him. Biblical revelation, however, makes it clear we exist to serve an almighty God of the universe who is very much involved in our lives. A relationship with Him demands we take personal initiative to do everything possible to stay in tune with Him, follow His leading, and do life His way.

Finally, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism believes "good people go to heaven when they die." I guarantee most of the people in your neighborhood completely believe that lie.

They believe in the Mush God who grades everyone's goodness on a celestial curve and then says, "Good... good enough... not good enough... oh, OK, you just go on in!" Biblical revelation, however, makes it only too clear no one is good enough to go to heaven. All have sinned and fall short of God's glory. That's why we desperately need Jesus. He lived the perfect life that we could not. He died and rose again to pay the penalty for our sin so we might be made acceptable to God. When we put our trust in Him, He gives us eternal life as a gift – never as something we've earned or deserved.

We live in a culture where people think they have a relationship with the true God, but who are actually worshiping a god of their own imagination. They've substituted the god of human imagination for the God of biblical revelation. William Temple, a Christian leader, had an interesting insight. He said, "It is much worse to have a false idea of God than no idea at all." That's why evangelism in our culture can be very challenging. And if we're honest with ourselves, we can allow an imaginary god to replace the God of Scripture in our lives, too. I can end up with a god who expects and demands nothing from me, a god who exists to forgive my sins not remove them, a god who is perfectly content with the leftovers of my life – the leftovers of my time, my energy, my talents, my money. Do I worship a god who's content with less than being first in my life?

A fable from India describes four brothers who each learned how to master a special ability. "I have mastered the ability," said the first, "of taking just a bone of some creature and create the flesh that goes with it." The second one said, "I know how to grow that creature's skin and hair if there is flesh on its bones." The third said, "I am able to create its limbs if I have the flesh, the skin, and the hair." "And I," concluded the fourth, "know how to give life to that creature if its body is complete." The brothers went into the jungle to find a bone so they could demonstrate their special abilities. As fate would have it, the bone they found was a lion's. The first brother added flesh to the bone, the second grew hide and hair, the third completed the body, and the fourth gave the lion life. Shaking its mane, the ferocious beast arose and jumped on his creators. He killed them all and vanished contentedly into the jungle. We too have the capacity through our imagination to create something that can destroy us. A false idea of God which ends up being a false god – an idol. Very dangerous and deadly spiritually.

"You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods." (Ex. 20:4-5 NLT) Not even a god of my imagination. Why is this such a big deal? Why was God so worked up about this? God has made a great effort to reveal Himself to us. He gave us the Ten Commandments. He gave us the Bible. He sent His Son, Jesus, into the world – the perfect, final, and eternal revelation of Himself. When we replace the biblical God with a god of our own imagination, God gets jealous. We worship a fantasy. Now, jealousy is all about offended love. Jealousy can be healthy and good. Envy is wanting something that belongs to someone else, but jealousy is wanting to hold on to what belongs to you. For example, a husband is properly jealous of his wife if another man shows her too much interest of the wrong

kind. In fact, if he didn't get jealous, you'd question his love for her. When you or I worship a god of our own imagination, we worship a false god – an idol – ultimately.

A.W. Tozer, a wonderful man of God in the last century, wrote, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." He's right. Nothing affects your life more than what you think about God – your choices, your relationships, your lifestyle, how you use your time, how you spend your money, everything. Perhaps the greatest choice in life is this one: will I worship the God of biblical revelation or human imagination? The passage we're reflecting on today implies a second choice that's really a consequence of the first choice.

WILL I CHOOSE BLESSING OR JUDGMENT?

What does God say here? "I lay the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations of those who reject me. But I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands." (Ex. 20:5-6 NLT) If you choose to worship a god of human imagination, you will, in effect, select a destructive legacy for yourself, your children, and your descendants. Don't misunderstand these verses. I know it sounds like God punishes children for their parents' rejection of God and blesses kids for their parents' obedience to God. How is that fair? That's not the meaning of the verse. In fact, elsewhere the Bible says, "The person who sins is the one who will die. The child will not be punished for the parent's sins, and the parent will not be punished for the child's sins. Righteous people will be rewarded for their own righteous behavior, and wicked people will be punished for their own wickedness." (Ezekiel 20:18 NLT)

Instead, God provided a profound truth. When you adopt a certain attitude toward God – either toward Him or away from Him – certain factors are set into motion which inevitably impact and affect you, your children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. God is simply predicting what any of us can observe. Parents who are indifferent to God usually produce children who don't care about God either. A lack of interest in God or respect for God is like a contagious disease that gets passed down from one generation to the next. How does God react? In many cases, out of His grace and mercy He delays judgment for several generations in the hope that people will repent. But sin collects a kind of interest (call it judgment) like a saving account collects interest. Eventually, judgment comes. It's not as if these descendants are innocent people who never had the chance to become followers of Jesus. In fact, they're just as indifferent to God and spiritually hard as their parents if not more so. And if they don't repent, God's judgment is inevitable. The warning is very clear here. If you choose to worship a god of your own imagination instead of the God who's revealed Himself, you invite disaster and destruction upon yourself and your family for generations to come.

It's the foolish parent who says, "I don't want to force Christianity on my kids. I don't want to make them go to church. If they don't want to go, I can't do anything about it. Let them decide if they want anything to do with God." Such a tragic mistake! God never intended a child to be given the responsibility of deciding whether or not to be exposed to God and His truth. This congregation like many others offers a host of

opportunities for children and young people to learn more about God: church school classes, an age appropriate experience during worship, clubs on Wednesdays, a youth gathering on Sunday nights. I'm frankly bewildered by Christian parents who more or less shrug and say, "Whatever. Take it or leave it." I like how someone named Harold Korver put it, "If you don't make a habit out of going to church each Sunday, you shoot yourself in the foot, your children in the leg, and your grandchildren in the heart." And what this church provides should only supplement what you, Mom and Dad, provide in your home. Do you read the Bible together with your kids? Do you look for ways to discuss the things of God with them? Of course, we can't force children to become followers of Jesus. Who's even suggesting that? But God assumes parents will create an environment where their children are given every opportunity to know there's nothing more important in all of life than God and a relationship with Him. And they ought to know beyond a shadow of any doubt that no one is more important in the lives of Mom and Dad than the God of the Bible.

Fortunately, when we choose to worship the God of biblical revelation, we are also choosing to pass along a godly heritage to our children and our descendants. That's the promise in v. 6, "But I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands." (Ex. 20:6 NLT) Yes, ignoring God collects interest. Call it judgment. But love for God and obedience to His will and ways also collects a kind of interest as well. Call it blessing and that blessing compounds and builds to a far greater extent than what judgment can ever do. Do you see what God is saying here? Yes, indifference to God does indeed have a kind of trickle-down effect. It can have destructive power for three to four generations in a family. But love for God and obedience to Him has a far more powerful and pervasive trickle-down effect. It can bless up to a thousand generations! If you're a Christian today, it's because someone was faithful to pass along the saving message of Jesus to you. It might have been a friend, a non-relative. But in most cases, it was probably a relative: a parent, a grandparent, a spouse, or a member of your extended family. Often, because God is so gracious, His mercy will penetrate a family where for generations no one had any use for God. By His grace, He breaks that chain of indifference. Someone gets converted and a whole new chain of blessing begins. The consequences of obedience are greater than disobedience. And God's grace is even more powerful than His judgment.

It occurs to me each of us has one of three choices in life. Many of us are simply called to continue a godly heritage. Your parents put God first. They lived godly lives. They were active servants in a local church. They tithed their income to the Lord's work. They loved spiritually lost people. They had compassion for the poor. If that's your background, praise God! Without a doubt, a godly heritage is the most wonderful heritage any person could ever possess. Your task is to build on that foundation, deepen it, and expand it in every way possible. That includes passing it along to your children and their children as intentionally and faithfully as you can.

Some of us are called to start a godly heritage. You were raised in a family that was largely indifferent to God. Perhaps you're the first one in your family to call Jesus Savior and Lord. What a calling! What a blessing! Through you God now has the opportunity to alter the future history of your family for all eternity. God says if you

continue to commit your way to Him, if you live your life according to His ways, if you will put God first and keep Him first, not only will you be blest, but your children will be blest, and potentially your descendants will be blest for a thousand generations.

Finally, some people choose to reject a godly heritage. Is there anything sadder than when a person rejects the godly heritage handed down to him or her through indifference? I've witnessed this in my own extended family. I have first cousins whose parents – my aunts and uncles – were career missionaries in India, and yet those cousins have become indifferent to their heritage. They have no interest in following Jesus themselves. Could they throw away anything more precious? Rejecting a godly heritage can happen in such a subtle way. Instead of outright opposition to God, it can reveal itself in an unwillingness to put God first and keep Him there. It's just never important enough to do. You just never get around to it, but the outcome is the same.

Have you made one of those three choices? Will you continue a godly heritage, start a godly heritage, or reject a godly heritage? Don't put off that decision another day. To delay a decision to put God first in your life is to choose indifference to God. It's a rejection of God. Each of us has a choice. Will we choose to worship the God of biblical revelation or the god of human imagination? That choice will lead you inevitably to make a second choice. Will you choose blessing or judgment?

Let's be honest. The daily decision to keep on obeying God and to keep on following Jesus isn't always as easy as it might seem. In a recent TV commercial a young man is struggling with whether to go through with an arranged marriage. In his home country arranged marriages were the norm. But after living in America, he was having second thoughts about adhering to this ancient custom, especially since he'd never met his wife-to-be. Still, when she flew into the airport, he dutifully waited for her, flowers in hand, and a gloomy expression on his face. But when she stepped through the terminal, everything changed. She was beautiful! A real knock out! Suddenly his gloomy demeanor disappeared. The thought of marrying this woman was no longer a dreaded duty; it was a delight. What had changed? He'd seen her.

Often we can serve God out of a sense of obligation. We read the Bible, but our attention is elsewhere. We drag ourselves to church. We force ourselves to serve others. But our hearts aren't in it. We're like that guy at the airport, grudgingly holding flowers for God. We're trying to follow Jesus because we know we should, but it can feel like a joyless burden. What can change this? Seeing God. When we get a fresh vision of who God truly is, suddenly we get re-energized to follow Jesus again and do His mission. Once we gaze upon His grandeur and glory again, obedience ceases to be a duty. Once we grasp His great love again, serving is no longer a duty—it's a joy!

The God of biblical revelation is beautiful beyond description. Sometimes we need to ask His help in getting rid of the false, worn-out, or just woefully inadequate pictures of Him provided by our imagination. Let's be informed – rightly informed – about God. When that happens through His Spirit, we will worship and serve Him appropriately. We will be blest and we will pass on that blessing to those who follow us.