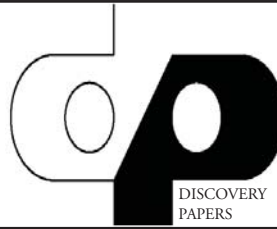


# SMALL GODS

**SERIES: LOVE GOD, LOVE PEOPLE**



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Spain entered this World Cup as defending champions and as reigning European champions. So it was really surprising that they lost their first game 5-1 to the Netherlands. In the match their goalie Iker Casillas made one huge mistake that caused a goal and let in several others many felt he should have saved. The surprise turned to shock when Spain lost to Chile 2-0 and Casillas made more mistakes. After just two games they were already eliminated in the first great shock of this year's World Cup. Casillas became one of the most reliable sports clichés: the scapegoat. Italy has also searched for a scapegoat after their early exit. Do you blame the coach? The striker who failed to produce? The goalie who let in a couple questionable goals? Emotions run so high, and people want someone to blame. There needs to be someone to blame. I remember that the name Tim Lincecum triggered a lot of emotion the last time I was here in the summer of 2012.

I tell you that story first so that when I tell you the next one you hopefully will not dismiss it as just old and weird and primitive. Listen carefully to this one. The ancient Assyrians had a tradition that they could call on in times of disaster. Old Testament scholar John Walton calls it the substitute king ritual. Let's say a terrifying omen like an eclipse occurred. Such a horrible sign suggested the life of the king himself was in danger. The gods must be angry. There is a great gap separating our cultures, yet these were real people dealing with a crisis. So this is what they did. Their magicians would use sign-telling to select a substitute king and queen. They would invest this king with all the symbols of office for 100 days while the real king went into hiding. This substitute king would do special ceremonies to call this omen on himself. And then, at the end of the 100 days, the king and queen would be put to death. The real king could then resume his office. It's not that the Assyrians believed they could really fool the gods. They just wanted to give them a ready victim. They could not know why the gods were mad, but they could give them an easy target for their anger and somehow hope to escape.<sup>1</sup>

We don't want to admit that we live so much of our days in vague fear and anxiously ready to blame a victim to save ourselves. The Assyrians were not some obscure tribe—they were one of the leading, elite cultures of the day and this is the solution that made the most sense to them. What separates us from them is less than we would like to believe.

Anxious scapegoating goes on all the time in business, politics, and even families. When something threatens the whole there is no more common move than to identify one person onto whom all blame can be placed so the rest of us can move on. All we've lost is the blatant religious expression, but the forces are still so much the same.

This example from Assyria captures something about the ancient world into which the Ten Commandments fell like a meteor. Instead of the people wondering what gods are out there and what they want, Yahweh acts first to save the people. Instead of a swirl of gods, there is only one God, the true creator. Instead of malicious gods who did not disclose their minds, Yahweh says exactly what he expects. Instead of demanding care from the people, he gives moral commandments. Instead of throwing victims into the machinery to be destroyed, each person knows and is responsible before God for his own choices.

I so appreciated Steve Zeisler's introductory sermon last week. It is important for us to frame the law properly as New Testament believers, but as Steve pointed out, doing so doesn't mean we throw the law away. We are here this morning to examine and receive courage from the genius of the first commandment. In order to sharpen our focus, we will look at the commandments in their ancient context and then in ours, which again looks more and more like the old pagan one.

The first commandment simply states in Exodus 20:3—

**“You shall have no other gods before me.”**

This is extremely personal language. He has already told us his name, Yahweh. He is the Lord *your* God, single person—you and you and you. In this verse he demands that you have no gods before him. Hebrew is a very earthy language and literally it says “There will be no other gods for you on my face” or “in front of my face.” God demands intimate, direct, and exclusive relationship with each of us.

It's hard to appreciate how enormous this was. After millennia of monotheism we have accustomed ourselves to the idea that if we bother to pray at all, it will be to the Creator of the universe. But the first commandment required the ancient Israelites to leap several levels through

the worldview of their culture. In the Ancient Near East, the first cause of the universe, whatever it or he or she is, hides behind even the greatest gods of their pantheons. The great gods were not creators but only worked to help form the preexisting creation. These gods were often also national Gods, the god whose worship unified a certain people. But even the national god was not really the concern of common folk. It was the job of the king and the priesthood to take care of the national god. Every day the priests made sure to awaken, wash, cloth, feed, and put the god to bed.<sup>2</sup> But common people did not need to bother themselves about that.<sup>3</sup>

Religion for normal people was primarily found in prayer to more local, household gods, and ancestors. These smaller gods were likely to notice and care about the needs of average people—needs for “a sound reputation, social success, material prosperity, and of course, the ability to have children.” Does that list sound familiar? Has that much really changed? I’ll read it again: “a sound reputation, social success, material prosperity, and of course, the ability to have children.” It was these small gods<sup>4</sup> who were likely to be able to grant favors that led to “life in abundance.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet small gods, like great gods, were hard to read. It was very easy to inadvertently offend a small god and draw his wrath.<sup>6</sup> Religion then was like trying to walk in the dark without a light and not stumble. You feared these gods and bowed before them, but you really didn’t love them.<sup>7</sup> They were, however, within reach for helping you with what you needed to do.<sup>8</sup> They weren’t good—but you could hope they would be good to you.<sup>9</sup>

But the first commandment collapses all these levels of spirituality together. The remote creative force of the universe, the national god, and the family god were really all one—Yahweh.<sup>10</sup> The radical thing is identification of such an intimate god with the otherwise completely remote ultimate creator. He is actually the provider of daily needs. This helps explain why the Israelites had such a hard time grasping that there was no space at all for worship of small local gods. They really had a hard time thinking outside of these categories.

This is what I want to focus on this morning, the small gods we put on God’s face. Centuries of Christian history and then the Enlightenment helped us in places like America to largely forget demons, spirits, ghosts, superstitions, purity rules, the evil eye, magic, curses, and a whole host of other small gods by which people seek to live in abundance and avoid calamity. Yet they never went away in the rest of the world, and to a great extent the same forces exist in our society under different names.

The English writer Ferdinand Mount, a former editor of the famous Times Literary Supplement, wrote a book on this a few years ago called *Full Circle: How The Classical World Came Back to Us*. He analyzed our attitudes towards things like the body, food, sex, religion, and fame and showed that throwing off our Christian heritage did not bring us into a brand new world but took us straight back to the old pagan one. He observes that “so much about our society that is now emerging bears an astonishing resemblance to the most prominent features of what we call the classical world.”<sup>11</sup>

We may call our small gods differently, but the impulses and results are so similar. We give partial loyalty to things that seem to help us, search for a better deal, feel unending anxiety, and try to manage the unmanageable. Small gods thrive on our desire for social acceptance and our fear of exclusion.<sup>12</sup> This is their realm. They tell us things like “I can take the pain away.” “I can make people like you.” “I can fix that.” “I can get you what he has.” They do not claim to ask for our full loyalty. They offer an exchange. They say “I will do that for you if you do something for me.”

Yahweh, in contrast, makes his demands up front and completely. Small gods make it all seem so easy and favorable. But they never stop asking for more. There’s a lot of fine print we failed to read. It’s like being in line at Disneyland. You finally go around the corner, thinking you’ve arrived, only to find another big room filled with people in line ahead of you.

It turns out that our brand loyalties look an awful lot like the loyalties people felt to their small gods in the ancient world. This observation comes not from a Christian thinker but from marketing expert Marty Neumeier. He states that:

*Brands are the little gods of modern life, each ruling a different need, activity, mood, or situation. Yet you’re in control.*<sup>13</sup>

Like fads or brands, small gods represent a life we aspire to, and disasters we hope to avoid—and as long as it works for us we go along for the ride, making our offerings—purchases—and receiving a product in return that somehow gives us what we ordered while leaving us with a case of buyers remorse. With small gods the packaging is always better than the product. They entice through envy. They sell you a glossy catalog vision for life.

There’s a great rant on the internet about what the Williams-Sonoma catalog does to readers. It’s an amazingly perceptive piece of parody that I’ve edited a bit to be

church-appropriate:

*The Williams-Sonoma universe is a magical pristine alternate dimension where every room has crown molding and your wife can [squeeze] out a perfect red velvet Bundt cake in nine seconds flat from her Wolf oven and you are [stinking] RICH.*<sup>14</sup>

But there really is nothing to it—it's a hollow life.

There can be all sorts of small gods. Anything we consume in exchange for a feeling or certain result can be one. A small god for me a number of years ago was listening to the radio talk show host Michael Savage. When we first got married we were often commuting in the car in the evenings when he was on. At first listening to him was fun because what he said was so shocking and amusing. Yet over time I found myself taking him more and more seriously. I started to pay homage to him with my time and attention and in return got a powerful narrative to explain what was going on in America. The funny thing about this small god is that it disappeared for me simply because we moved to Croatia and never heard him. I stopped thinking about him and then stopped entertaining as serious the kinds of things he says. Years later when I heard him again I couldn't really believe I had once taken him seriously.

We have a really hard time appreciating that our small gods might get us in real trouble. I thought I was just listening to a provocative but entertaining radio host. But I see now that I might not have just walked away from Michael Savage if we had not left for Croatia. As good westerners we can hardly bring ourselves to entertain the idea that our small gods ever really get any hold on us. We think we are in control and can always walk away. We have a hard time taking it seriously that there are any spiritual forces at work in contemporary fads or that they could pose any danger.

And now I'm in danger as a preacher, because this is where you're expecting me to bash Harry Potter. So it's worth unpacking this part a little. Let's take magic for example. I've read the Harry Potter books and enjoyed them. So there are neutered small gods and pagan ideas that we can often find quite entertaining. But is there really a danger there? Some Christians argue that such literature is poisoned fruit from a pagan tree, while others quite enjoy it.

I find the history of missions and its effects on culture to be really helpful in thinking through this. One of the great genius impulses of Christianity is that because we believe in translating the Bible we end up taking an interest in local cultures. God meant something pagan before Germanic

ancestors adopted Christianity. Theos in Greek is older than the New Testament. You end up having to study and understand a culture and its cultural products in order to translate the Bible. Lamin Sanneh, a Yale professor from Gambia, argues that despite the biases of missionaries they almost always gave a boost to the preservation of local cultural traditions because they wrote them down and studied them as a part of translating the Bible. The first generations of believers in a place might react very strongly against the demonic forces wrapped up in various rituals, but a couple generations later it turns out the whole thing has been stripped of its power and preserved as a local tradition. Several of the Operation Mobilisation staff I met in India through the PBC trip told me such stories, how they were reclaiming the cultural value of various traditions that older Christians had felt were too explicitly pagan to affirm. Like Christmas trees. I know a lot of us are willing to drop kick the Easter bunny, but how many of us are really so hard core as to throw out Christmas trees because of their pagan past? So it turns out that the gospel makes it safe for us to enjoy mythology, music, dance, and a host of other cultural forms.

So on the one hand I am not arguing for seeing a demon under every bush and throwing out everything in the world that is connected to paganism by the thinnest thread, but on the other hand I am arguing that small gods are nasty, real, and powerful. As the Christian framework of the West collapses, small gods are more noisy and demanding and insidious. They don't need to get a hold of us through Christmas trees and the Easter bunny. They are doing just fine through advertising and the obsessions of contemporary life.

I propose we can best get at identifying the small gods around us by looking at their fruit. If you know what kinds of things small gods do to people, you can work backwards to seeing them. So here are some of their fruits.

Small gods suffocate our interior lives—our quiet, still hearts. It turns out that the ability to be reflective is a fragile thing. Our culture threw off the commandments of God, thinking that would free us to fully explore ourselves. But a robust interior life can only be supported by the walls of commandments. Otherwise you're just left with the churn of your social and public life.

Social media is pushing us to lose track of our own inner lives. Instead we just think about how we will package our experiences for the social media feed. That's life in a world of small gods. You're no longer a person whose identity is supported by walls. You're just tossed back and forth in a long, nervous journey to get and keep the regard of others. When we push everything out there to our social media



stream we construct an identity and end up worshipping it. Similarly, we hardly believe anything anymore because of internal conviction—we choose our political opinions on the basis of whether those beliefs align us with the kind of people we want to be known as.

Small gods present themselves as a wise spreading of our bets. When one falters another can pick us up. During the World Cup repeatedly dejected fans have been shown in the last moments of their team's elimination, only to perk up and go crazy when they see themselves on the screen. The small god of fame rescues them from their failed small soccer god. Yet the end result of these small gods leaves us worse off because none of them are reliable. None of them offer to pick us up when we have nothing to offer.

Some small gods consume the joy from our lives through obsessions over purity and ritual, promising that if we just got it all perfect we would feel perfect. Perhaps we do not experience superstitious anxiety like the ancients, but we certainly experience a great deal of anxiety about our food and environment. So many people lose track of the life they really have in obsessing over eating or organizing. Small gods make their advanced learners tight, suspicious, and arrogant towards newbies who follow after them.

Lastly, small gods promise some version of abundance yet leave us ground down and burned out, always blaming us that we haven't gotten the formula right yet. The clothing company Lululemon is a fantastic barometer of the day. Their marketing is impeccable and all about small gods, and they are quite clear about it. The founder described their vision as all about personal greatness.

*Greatness is demanding the best of everything and doing what is required to get it. Greatness is demanding friends who demand the best, demanding the best wife or husband and the best job with the best pay.*<sup>15</sup>

Small gods take an end result, like greatness, that should be the product of some other pursuit, and set it up as an end in itself. They get things out of order in a way that consumes us. They wear us down until we are so hollow that we could say something as shallow as "Greatness is demanding the best wife or husband." Who wants to be married to someone whose affection for you is predicated on you being the best? What place does that leave for a child with special needs or an older person who requires care, or just for normal, messed up people? The author of that rant about Williams-Sonoma ends with the fantastic observation that

*. . . in 21st century America, you are constantly being shown how much better life can be, and that is what makes your life so [horribly] intolerable.*<sup>16</sup>

The first commandment cuts through all of this, denying small gods both their reality and their ability to provide for our souls. But I know how hard it is to come back from this, to step away from the "have it your way" slogans that bombard us daily. Everything about this commandment is offensive to contemporary ears—particularly, exclusivity, blanket prohibition, and the command not to check out your options. The first commandment lacks all contemporary cachet: it is not nuanced, it is not tolerant, and does not embrace ambiguity. Yet, everything really beautiful and lasting and true embraces limits and focus and the clarity that comes from a loyal commitment.

We can't keep the beauty of weddings for long when we stop believing the vows actually mean anything. A wedding is beautiful because of the startling fact that we are watching a man and a woman revoke all others. Today we think the form and going through the motions will give us the same thrill as the actual commitment. We love to watch, play video games, and do simulations. We are too easily pleased by our diversions. We'd rather play than experience the thrill of actually committing ourselves and doing the real thing. Having no other gods means getting in the game ourselves and finding out how God will meet us there.

And so we come back to Yahweh, who demands no care and feeding. Instead of sacrifices to small gods and then doing whatever the heck you want in your personal lives, we are called to worship God by obedience in our personal lives. Inside the commandments, fragile, beautiful, complex, and heroic things take place.

The commandments are like the walls of a garden. They keep out weeds and pests so that complex life has a place to thrive. The commandments do not deny us life but create the conditions under which true life can happen.

G. K. Chesterton commented that:

*The outer ring of Christianity is a rigid guard . . . but inside . . . you will find the old human life dancing like children, and drinking wine like men; for Christianity is the only frame for pagan freedom. But in the modern philosophy the case is opposite; it is its outer ring that is obviously artistic and emancipated; its despair is within.*<sup>17</sup>

I'm reminded how much small gods have hollowed us out when I hear the song *Rehab* come on the radio.

It is still played a lot in Zagreb, at least. Its author, Amy Winehouse, was an incredibly talented musician who led a very troubled life. At one point her record label considered dropping her to force her to get help but she was so popular that they just couldn't bring themselves to do it. *Rehab* is a song about refusing to get treatment. Four years after writing it she died of alcohol poisoning after binge drinking at home. Her fans expressed their shock and grief. Tributes poured out. Yet we keep listening to the song. Even when our small gods kill, we just won't let them go. Just last week another young musician, Lana Del Rey, was interviewed in a British paper about her most recent album. She said "I wish I was dead already" like Amy Winehouse and Kurt Cobain. When Kurt Cobain's daughter tweeted in response about how hard it was to grow up never knowing her Dad, and asked her not to say such things, others attacked her criticism. Small gods' love sacrifices. They need them to keep going. Those who gather around them always form unstable communities of false intimacy.

If you read Jeremiah 2-7 you will see how little has changed. That long passage is a gripping, psychologically immediate description of the people of Judah rejecting every rebuke of their addiction to small gods. They follow other gods and lose their consciences. Then they exploit the poor to make sure their pleasures continue. They ignore God's judgment on Israel and insist the same can never happen to them. They are consumed by their lusts and refuse God's mercy. They become childish unable to face reality. In the end there is this horrible shock. The people desperately commit the ultimate atrocity, sacrificing their own children in the fire to a pagan god.

How much has really changed? We also think ourselves shrewd and nuanced. The old restrictions are obsolete. I can handle it. I used a spreadsheet to calculate my limit. I can grab what I want from my small gods. I won't mess up like those other guys who got addicted. They just did it wrong. I know better. I'll get what I want. I'll fill myself with good things. I'll avoid going over the cliff. If I don't try I'll never get the best. And then somehow we are shocked, just shocked when our small gods destroy yet another person and leave those around them helpless. Our small gods give us a day or two and then say, hey, that was just a glitch, you will be fine, they were a loser and dead weight anyway. Sometimes they even whisper to us: you know, a sacrifice makes us stronger.

But there is another way. The Lord, Yahweh, Savior God, still holds real life out to us. He says "you can't get there that way. I leave no space for small gods. I will give you more than you can imagine: directly, personally, my own life. But I won't do it as just another one of your

gods." If we are willing to put these gods away, he is still waiting. In the midst of that horrible passage in Jeremiah God still calls out in kindness. In Jeremiah 3:19 God says, *How gladly I would treat you like my children and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation* (NIV). In the garden there is complex, beautiful, tender life. Even in a broken world it can be entered. I can't tell you what that life will look like for you exactly. We don't get to know ahead of time what will grow for us there. But it will be beautiful and fitting.

Philip Yancey wrote a wonderful reflection on G. K. Chesterton, whom I've mentioned, in a book called *Soul Survivor*.<sup>18</sup> As we move towards the close and reflect on how the first commandment can help us demonstrate the gospel to our world it is a great help. Chesterton was a journalist in London, most active in the first half of the 20th century. He was an enormously fat man who lived in his own world, an eccentric. He was also one of the greatest Christian writers and apologists of the modern age. Chesterton would joke and fumble while defending the most traditional of Christian doctrines. He was friends with and publicly debated unbelieving intellectuals like H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw. What was striking in their debates was the jolly fat man defended old ideas like original sin and the last judgment and the thin, stern, worried men like Wells and Shaw proclaimed boldly optimistic views of the future.

I think we can still play our role well in a similar way. Let us go out cheerily into the world defending the indefensible idea that undivided loyalty to God is best and let the thin, cold, hard prophets of the world say how wrong we are and how much better the world is without God. The small gods will never satisfy them. Instead we trust Yahweh, the God we cannot control and whose favors we cannot buy. We do not know what he will give us, but it will be good and it will be enough and we will find rest for our souls. He will make something beautiful out of our lives if we have no other gods before his face. Let us have the attitude that Chesterton recorded once in a short poem:

*Here dies another day  
During which I have had eyes, ears, hands  
And the great world round me;  
And with tomorrow begins another.  
Why am I allowed two?*<sup>19</sup>

If we are grateful, single-minded people, those around us will notice.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 139. "...the ritual was not intended to fool the gods, but to give them a ready victim on whom to carry out their intentions. It would never be known in this case what the gods had been angry about. It only gave them a target to inflict their anger on, which would result in their appeasement."

<sup>2</sup>Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 136. Pagan gods had needs that humans meet: every day they are awakened, washed, clothed, fed two lavish meals, and put to bed.

<sup>3</sup>Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 139. "Common folks counted on the king and the priests to maintain the favor of the god at this corporate level."

<sup>4</sup>Terry Pratchett wrote a novel called *Small Gods*, I think I got the term from him.

<sup>5</sup>Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 144-5.

<sup>6</sup>Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 144-5. "But the relationship with the gods was a fragile symbiosis. Inadvertent actions by the individual could suddenly draw the wrath of the deity."

<sup>7</sup>Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 161. "One submitted to [the gods], one feared them, one bowed down to them and trembled before them: one did not 'love' or 'like' them."

<sup>8</sup>Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 143. "People wanted to worship a god within reach."

<sup>9</sup>Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 109.

<sup>10</sup>Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 142. "In the polytheistic religions of the ancient world it was not considered obligatory for individuals to worship the state gods. It might be to their advantage and coincide with their self-interest to do so, but the state god would hardly be offended by their worship of their local or ancestral deities. This observation brings considerable clarity to the centuries-long struggle of the Israelites to understand that Yahweh's status as state God excluded the worship of local gods, nature gods, or ancestral gods. Their native mentality would have seen no conflict ... The uniqueness of Israel is that here we can see an attempt to merge these two horizons. Every indication is that they were consistently syncretistic throughout the monarchy period." This quote helped me put this together.

<sup>11</sup>Ferdinand Mount, *Full Circle: How the Classical World Came Back to Us* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 1. "God's long funeral is over, and we are back where we started. Two thousands years of history have melted into the back story, which no one reads any more ... So much about our society that is now emerging bears an astonishing resemblance to the most prominent features of what we call the classical world. Often without our being in the least aware of it, the ways in which we live our rich and varied lives correspond, almost eerily so, to the ways in which the Greeks and Romans lived theirs ... It is as though the 1,500 years after the fall of Rome had been time out from traditional ways of being human."

<sup>12</sup>Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 146. "The 'offender' inevitably experienced social rejection. No one wanted to suffer from guilt by association and likewise attract the ire of some god." Working against the scapegoating mechanisms of society will always mark you as different. The big difference is that the Israelites knew their offenses.

<sup>13</sup>Marty Neumeier, *The Brand Gap: How to Bridge the Distance Between Business Strategy and Design* (Berkeley: New Riders, 2006), <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0321348109/>. "Depending on your Unique Buying State, you can join any number of tribes on any number of days and feel part of something bigger than yourself. You can belong to the Callaway tribe when you play golf, the VW tribe when you drive to work, and the Williams-Sonoma tribe when you cook a meal. You're part of a select clan (or so you feel) when you buy products from these clearly differentiated companies. Brands are the little gods of modern life, each ruling a different need, activity, mood, or situation. Yet you're in control. If your latest god falls from Olympus, you can switch to another one." "On Sundays they worship Harley, god of the open road."

<sup>14</sup>Drew Magery, "The 2013 Haters Guide to the Williams-Sonoma Catalog," <http://deadspin.com/the-2013-haters-guide-to-the-williams-sonoma-catalog-1481230580>.

<sup>15</sup>Chip Wilson, <http://lululemon.com/community/blog/the-lululemon-vision/>.

<sup>16</sup>Magery, "The 2013 Haters Guide to the Williams-Sonoma Catalog,"

<sup>17</sup>G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, public domain.

<sup>18</sup><http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/september3/6.66.html?paging=off>

<sup>19</sup>G. K. Chesterton, *The 'Notebook'*, public domain.