

## Who is the measure of all Things?

Sermon by John Strommen on Exodus 20: 4-11 June 3, 2018

The ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras once wrote: “Man is the measure of all things.” Not the gods, not any external measure of value, but you and me. The measure of all things. Sounds a little presumptuous, don’t you think?

This idea was echoed by the late George Carlin, who once quipped, “Have you ever noticed that anyone driving faster than you is a maniac, and anyone driving slower than you is an idiot?” Does that describe you?

It does me. No matter what speed I might be driving, if someone passes me, it’s “Geez, buddy, take it easy.” Or if someone is in front of me slowing me down, first it’s the eye roll, then “You could at least *approach* the speed limit!” Whatever speed *I’m driving* is the measuring stick.

The first three commandments – and especially the first commandment - remind us in no uncertain terms that you or I *are not* the measure of all things. God is. *I am the Lord your God*, reads the first commandment.

The book of Job reminds us of this when God responds to Job’s complaints about how God is running the world. God says to Job,

“Were you there when I laid the foundation of the earth?  
Tell me, if you have understanding.  
Who determined its measurements - surely you know!  
Or who stretched the line upon it?  
On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone?”

Yeah. Who did determine the earth’s measurements?

The earth and all creation is a wonder to behold. I’d say God got the measurements right, from the Big Bang to the galaxies and solar systems to the impossibly complex blueprints in each one of us called DNA. These measurements are the laws of nature, the laws that come from God, who is the measure of all things.

The result is an “If/then” world of cause and effect, action and *consequence*. If I let go of this pen, then what happens? Gravity happens. If I eat 5,000 calories a day, then I will gain weight. If there are two rainy days in a row, then what day follows? Monday.

And just as the physical cosmos was measured and drawn, so too has God measured and drawn a moral universe to reflect God’s intention that *all of life* will thrive and flourish. And because God is the measure of all things, then what happens to all of God’s creatures, great and small, matters. Whether our neighbor is treated well or not matters. Whether we tell the truth to seek common ground or manipulate facts for our own purposes matters. The Ten Commandments are the measurements of God

that remind us of the nature of life and how we are to interact so that life is protected and nourished. Theologians call such laws “natural law,” the moral equivalent of gravity.

In fact, just like the physical universe, the laws of the moral universe have *consequences* if they are not heeded. If we are unfaithful to each other, there will be suffering and brokenness. If we do violence to one another, there will be pain that begets more pain. When we disregard these commandments, life is diminished all around. With God as the measure of all things, lives forged by the disregard of others are not real lives but counterfeit, and will collapse upon themselves.

The current TV show, “Westworld,” illustrates the human fantasy of having no consequences for our actions. In this dystopian future, those who can afford to do so can attend a theme park fashioned after the Wild, Wild West. Guests to the park are free to act out all their dark fantasies and can do anything they want to the very life-like, synthetic humans who populate the park. However, there are no consequences for the guests - no arrests, no injury, no pregnancies, no guilt? This is sort of like an attempt to break free of the world God made where there are laws and consequences for breaking them - consequences that hold us accountable to a larger vision, namely, the kingdom of God, where life flourishes for all, at the expense of no one.

Of all the commandments, none is more important than the first. It is the law upon which all the other laws are based: *I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods.* As the creator of all things, God is indeed the measure of all things, as Job reminds us. That means we have a very basic, fundamental relationship to God. It means any discussion about who we are as human beings must begin by talking about our relationship with our creator, who is a loving creator, not aloof and indifferent. Our creator has not only given us life, but sustains our life, moment by moment and promises a future for us.

An analogy to our dependent relationship with God might be helpful. We are like the earth, and God is like the sun (**pic #1**). You cannot talk about the earth without reference to the sun around which it orbits. All life on earth is dependent upon the precise nature of that relationship. Without the sun's rays, earth would be a lifeless rock.

The first commandment asks us to recognize this relationship, a relationship that is more personal than the first picture, more like this (**pic #2**). God's love for us is like gravity that holds us in orbit. Just as there is only one sun that the earth revolves around, so too is there only one true God upon which all present and future life depends. Unlike the sun, however, our God loves us and makes promises to us. And unlike earth, our orbit is not fixed. We can delude ourselves into thinking there are better options than God out there. Indeed, there are “gods” everywhere. So, we can drift out of orbit, can't we? We can easily drift to where it's cold and lifeless if we fail to recognize that we shall have no other gods.

This is why we need a commandment like “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it Holy.” Just as there is a rhythm to planetary orbit, there is a rhythm to life where we are invited to pause and remember who is the measure of all things and in whose orbit life is given. That is what the Sabbath is for. And then, as the second commandment reminds us, we are to address this God by name for the purpose of prayer, praise and thanksgiving.

What does it mean to have a “god?” Luther says in the Large Catechism: “A god means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress...That now, I say, upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god.”

Luther once wrote that there was no such thing as an atheist. By that he meant that everyone will place their ultimate trust in something or someone, loving that person or thing more than anything else. Whatever it is you love most and trust with your life – to make your life meaningful, to feel alive – that is your god.

But here’s the catch with whatever it is that we *ultimately* trust, for we must be able to count on it *no matter what*. For *ultimate trust* to work, the one we trust must exceed all measurement and limitation and be based on unconditional promise. No one apart from God can promise that to us. Anyone or thing that we might trust in this world has limits, it can be measured and is therefore not worthy of ultimate trust. No person we know can say they will always be there for you, because it is not their promise to make. A human life is measured by any number up to roughly 100 years at best. A human life is fragile and not fully trustworthy. If it were not so, would so many well-meaning, good people make the marriage vow “‘til death do us part” only to one day break that vow? We cannot provide unconditional promise to one another. There are too many conditions, too many limitations with us.

Likewise, no riches we earn or status we achieve is trustworthy because it can all be gone in a minute. Look at the recession of 2008. Or *you* can be gone in a minute, and you can’t take it with you - the riches, the whatever. And even while you have whatever earthly pleasure you have in this world, can it be trusted to make you *whole*? To give you deep happiness and peace? It cannot. We are made by our creator to be in a life-giving relationship with God who alone is worthy of our ultimate trust, for there are no measurements on the loving promises that issue forth from our God for us. There are no conditions that have to be met, so trust in this God, count your blessings each day, and give thanks, for God is trustworthy. Amen.