

February 16, Epiphany 6A (Matthew 5:21–37, Deuteronomy 30:15–20)

Idolatry is the desire to manipulate God.

by [Isaac S. Villegas](#) in the [February 12, 2020](#) issue

I'm always fighting the temptation to think of God in transactional terms. To think that morality is the currency of God's relationship with me, with us, and that God has rules we're supposed to learn—rules about how God operates, how God lives with us, how the divine happens in the world.

For example: God punishes people not because God wants to, but because God has to, because God is committed to some kind of cosmic law that God must obey. So the point of life is to learn God's rulebook so we don't get punished—in this life or the next—and instead can figure out how to get rewarded for our goodness, accredited for what we confess with our mouths and believe in our hearts. According to this logic, if we do good, then God is good to us, and if we do evil, God punishes us. To think like this about our relationship with God turns obedience into a way to achieve our best life now, to get what we want out of God.

All of this imagines God as a cosmic cash register—as if morality is a form of economics, as if ethics is a form of capitalism. We pay God with good deeds and justice, with right thinking and correct beliefs, and God gives us love and acceptance and blessings, multiplied a hundredfold. Morality becomes our currency—the money we use to pay God to get what we want out of this life.

As I write out the logic of this belief, I realize how ridiculous it all sounds. Everything about it is wrong. But I nonetheless, on occasion, find these ideas hiding in the recesses of my faith, in repressed theological impulses. It's a spirituality that imagines a predictable God I can manipulate—to render the divine useful for my life and my world if I pray the right way, do the right things, live the right kind of life.

I'd bet that the prosperity gospel finds a way to sneak into your faith, too, each of us with our own personal Joel Osteens and Creflo Dollars preaching in our heads—perhaps not about amassing enough wealth to make us comfortable on earth but about filling our storehouses in heaven, where moth and rust do not

destroy. Discussions about the so-called prosperity gospel usually fail to acknowledge a tendency in all of us. They exoticize a spirituality that's in fact at work in the unacknowledged reflexes of our own faith, as we serve God with our ethics and we hope for God to respond with justice—our gathering for worship as a prayer for the redemption of the world. “When the praises go up, the blessings come down,” Chance the Rapper says in his 2016 hit song “Blessings”—material provisions not for us alone, but for a world in need.

I may not be praying for money. But I am asking God for justice, and I find myself hoping my voice is worth more this year than last—that my spirituality has achieved extra value in God's account—since I've been keeping up with my devotions and showing up at protests. The prosperity gospel is a log in our own eyes, an economic spirituality latent within the Christian tradition from the beginning. We want a God invested in the health of this world, of our people, of our neighbors—a God whose benevolence we can predict, whose provision we can issue via direct deposit to the needy with our prayers. Our faith easily becomes an attempt to control the mysteries of God.

Jesus warns against this kind of spirituality in our passage from Matthew's Gospel, when he tells the disciples not to swear by anything in heaven or on earth—they can't control any of it, because none of it belongs to them or to us. We are not owners; we can't use anything on this earth or in heaven, not even our own lives, as collateral for what we commit to with our words. “And do not swear by your head,” Jesus goes on, “for you cannot make one hair white or black.” None of that can be used as a down payment for our promises because all of it belongs to God, and God can't be manipulated. God's action cannot be bought and sold.

Idolatry is what we call this desire to manipulate God—to come up with our own ideas about who God is, to formulate the rules God has to obey, and to honor that idea of God with our words and our thoughts. Idolatry is to worship that image of God. It is the creation of a God we can name and control, for our own benefit.

To live without idols takes vigilance—to notice our thoughts and feelings and to pay attention to our default ideas about God. All of us have implicit theologies, furtive beliefs tucked away somewhere, guiding how we think and live and wonder about ourselves and our world. Church life is a kind of vigilance of wonder, a lifelong purgation of idolatry. We commit to experience the mysteries of God's life that are as ordinary and unpredictable as the people around us—an image of God revealed in

our collective embodiment of God's presence.

We let go of our idols once we recognize that God has been here the whole time—not as a cosmic banker waiting for payment but as a presence of love in the comfort of a friend, the care of a neighbor, the solidarity of a stranger. “See,” Moses says to the people in Deuteronomy, “I have set before you today life and prosperity”; therefore, “choose life.” Choose this life before you—these specific lives beside you—for they hold in their hands the prosperity of God.