

Avoiding “lower case gods”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Psalm 138 (Common English Bible)

I give thanks to you with all my heart, LORD.

I sing your praise before all other gods.

²I bow toward your holy temple
and thank your name
for your loyal love and faithfulness
because you have made your name and word
greater than everything else.

³On the day I cried out, you answered me.
You encouraged me with inner strength.

⁴Let all the earth's rulers give thanks to you, LORD,
when they hear what you say.

⁵Let them sing about the LORD's ways
because the LORD's glory is so great!

⁶Even though the LORD is high,
he can still see the lowly,
but God keeps his distance from the arrogant.

⁷Whenever I am in deep trouble,
you make me live again;
you send your power against my enemies' wrath;
you save me with your strong hand.

⁸The LORD will do all this for my sake.
Your faithful love lasts forever, LORD!

Don't let go of what your hands have made.

- 1 Timothy 4:6-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁶If you put these instructions before the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound teaching that you have followed. ⁷Have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives' tales. Train yourself in godliness, ⁸for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. ⁹The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance. ¹⁰For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

The biblical book called “Psalms” has a central place in scripture – literally! When you were growing up and were learning to navigate your way through the Bible, perhaps someone showed you the little trick that when you try to open your Bible in the middle, with half of the pages in one hand and half in the other, you usually opened to the book of Psalms.

Most of the Bible presents God talking to people, or else it's narrative about the people's experiences with God. The Book of Psalms is different because it presents people talking *to* God or *about* God.¹

¹ <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/psalms-and-work> accessed 6/2/2021

If you look at the layout of the text in the Book of Psalms, you might suspect that the psalms are poetry. Actually, the texts are lyrics to ancient Hebrew worship songs; we might think of the Book of Psalms as a hymnbook minus the musical notation. It contains 150 songs — psalms — that serve various purposes in worship.

- Some are **psalms of praise** for God being like a benevolent king ruling all the world.
- Some so-called **pilgrimage psalms** would be songs that Jewish pilgrims would sing as their travels brought them near Jerusalem and the Jewish Temple.
- There are psalms of **lament**, where an individual or sometimes a group of people declare their sorrow because of tragedy, oppression, or neglect.
- There are some psalms that actually cry out for **vengeance** or evil to be brought on one's adversaries. Reading those psalms makes us uncomfortable, hearing someone asking God to hurt or kill one's opponents and enemies.
- And there are psalms of **thanksgiving** — when a person's gratitude for God's blessings or mercy just bubbles up. Today's suggested Bible reading of Psalm 138 is such a psalm of thanksgiving. I want to spend just a moment meditating on why the psalm was written and how these old, old words can be a helpful reminder for focusing our lives today.

In this psalm, the voice of the worshiper sang his (or her) gratitude. He was grateful because God answered his prayer. In verse 3, the psalmist declared, "On the day I cried out, you answered me. You encouraged me with inner strength."²

What exactly was the problem that caused the psalmist to cry out to God? We don't know. But the psalmist was certain that God answered his prayer: he felt that God blessed him with encouragement and strength to get through that situation, whatever it was. So grateful was he that, in the middle portion of the psalm, he encouraged even people in positions of power and authority — "all the earth's rulers" — to do what he had done: acknowledge God's greatness and goodness by humbly submitting themselves to God.

As I studied this psalm of thanksgiving, I kept coming back to the first verse, particularly the second half of the first verse. That portion of the verse declares, "I sing your praise before all other gods" (with the word "gods" uncapitalized).

Yes, it said, "other gods." So what's going on? Last week I mentioned that the Jewish and Christian faiths are monotheistic, meaning we believe in one Almighty God. But right there in the Hebrew scriptures we heard the psalmist refer to "all other gods." So did the Jews believe in just one God or not? And how about us?

Here's one explanation that some Bible scholars give for that phrase "other gods." The deities worshiped by other cultures were considered by the Jews to be mere servants in the celestial court of the One True God of Israel.

Here's another way to view the phrase "all other gods." Perhaps it's a way of referring to things, to conditions in our lives that demand our attention and energy to the point that they distract us from serving the will of the One True God. What might be "lower-case gods" in our world, in our lives? What desires, what status, what individuals make claims on our attention, our energy, our time, our loyalty? There are so many — so many temptations, so many distractions, so many "gods" that we may find ourselves pursuing:

² Psalm 138:3 Common English Bible

- Our culture idolizes the god of appearance and strength and youth. Certainly, there are good reasons to maintain our physical bodies: better health, maintaining form and function, minimizing pain and maximizing the ability to heal, having a positive self-image. Indeed, in 1 Corinthians St. Paul refers to the human body as “a temple of the Holy Spirit.”³ But whether in Hollywood or the local health club, we all have seen instances where physical appearance and youthfulness become the end, the goal, rather than the means to a more healthful life. Striving to have a healthy, youthful appearance can be a “lower-case god,” a distraction that pulls our focus away from the One True God.
- What else? As this school year winds down, I think about how kids experience pressure – sometimes from parents, sometimes from peers-- pressure to serve the god of academic perfection, the god of popularity, the god of extracurricular involvement. Striving for excellence is a good goal... if it doesn't distract from trying to live a wholesome, balanced life.
- We can succumb to the pressures exerted by the god of prosperity and wealth, in which decisions large and small are all guided by an insatiable hunger for profit, advancement, success.
- The god of self-righteousness creates a never-satisfied hunger to be victorious. Serving that “lower case god” means that we have this compelling need to always be right; we cannot ever be uncertain. We feel we already know it all; there's nothing to learn, there's no way we could expand our horizon, to grow in understanding. This “lower case god” of self-righteousness deceives us into thinking that we've already achieved unquestionable, godly perfection.

In our daily lives we are tempted to serve the siren call of these “the gods” which distract us from our true calling: our true calling to live lives that honor the example of Jesus Christ.

None other than Moses cautioned against the temptation to serve “lower case gods” rather than remaining focused on the One True God. In Deuteronomy Moses declared,

¹² watch yourself! Don't forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ¹³ Revere the Lord your God, serve him, and take your solemn pledges in his name! ¹⁴ Don't follow other gods, those gods of the people around you – ¹⁵ because the Lord your God, who is with you and among you, is a passionate God....⁴

And so today's psalm of thanksgiving is also a call to remain faithful. We declare to God, “I sing your praise before all other gods” [emphasis added]. May our words guide our works, and may our works give thanks with all our heart to Almighty God, Heavenly Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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³ 1 Corinthians 6:19 Common English Bible

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:12-15 Common English Bible