

Putting God First

Exodus 20:1-3

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On Monday, Beth and I traveled north on 74. When merging onto westbound 80, the car in front of us unexpectedly swerved to avoid another car. Because of wet pavement, it started sliding sideways and spinning in circles. Beth started praying out loud for the driver while I braked and pulled onto the shoulder as the car continued to spin out of control. Just when it looked like it was going to go into the ditch, the car took off and headed straight across all three westbound lanes. We were afraid it was going to cross the median and plow into the path of the eastbound traffic, but the car stopped abruptly when the thick cables making up the guardrail finally halted its momentum.

I could see the young woman was really shaken up. Beth immediately called 911 while I got out of our car and started waving my black Edgewood cap to get the traffic to slow down and move over because the front end of her car was sticking out into the far-left lane. When the officer arrived, he waved us on. We were thankful she didn't appear to be injured, at least physically.

Two things kept this situation from being much worse. First, I believe Beth's earnest prayers kept the car from crashing. Second, the guardrails did their job, keeping the driver from certain disaster.

Like guardrails, God's commands keep us safe and secure. One pastor put it like this: *"We are not saved by keeping the 10 Commandments. However, we are kept safe by them."* The Law reveals the righteousness of God but cannot produce righteousness in our hearts. The commandments don't give us life; but they certainly guide our life and help us stay on the road.

This is important because according to a new study by George Barna, 94% of Americans do not hold a biblical worldview. Sadly, 88% of Americans ascribe to some form of syncretism, which according to Barna is a *"disparate, irreconcilable collection of beliefs and behaviors that define people's lives...syncretism is a cut-and-paste approach to making sense of life...Americans embrace points of view or actions that feel comfortable or most convenient."*

It's easy to think our country is spinning out of control but our community is somehow doing better. Not so much. Earlier this month, an area high school class was given the "Oatmeal Trigger Test" to help students explore their own *"personal*

backfire effect” to 36 “*claims of fact*” statements. While I’m all for students being challenged to figure out what they believe, the statements they were asked to rank reveal a decidedly anti-biblical bias. I’ll list just five of them:

- *Teaching sex education at age-appropriate levels starting in kindergarten is beneficial.*
- *Virginity is a myth and the practice of determining worth to virgins is psychologically damaging.*
- *Homosexuality is not a choice; it is a biological construct.*
- *The Bible does not actually condemn homosexuality – people are misinterpreting and misquoting scripture to force a narrative.*
- *To decrease abortion, we need to have comprehensive sex-education, not abstinence or faith-based sex ed.*

Fellow followers of Christ, parents, and grandparents, I submit we must internalize the Ten Commandments and teach them to the next generation because they are foundational to developing disciples who hold to a biblical worldview. BTW, in order to anchor their worldview to God’s Word, our Mainspring ministry is focusing on how to communicate truth in a spirit of grace.

On Wednesday, I saw Shane Davis at McDonald’s having coffee with a bunch of friends. He said he really appreciated the first message in our *Written in Stone* series. I asked him if he needed a bookmark and remembered I had some in my backpack. I gave one to him and all his buddies. I had some extras, so I encouraged them to give some to their friends. One guy said, “*I know a big sinner I can give one to.*” We all laughed and then he said, “*I’m one of those big sinners.*” To which I replied, “*Me, too.*”

That’s one of the purposes of the 10 Commandments, isn’t it? When we see we are sinners, we’ll see our need for the Savior. Have you been working at memorizing the 10 Commandments? There are bookmarks in the seat back in front of you. Pull one out now and let’s read together.

1. One God
2. No idols
3. Revere His Name
4. Remember to Rest
5. Honor Parents
6. No murder
7. No adultery
8. No stealing

- 9. No lying
- 10.No coveting

Last week we made 10 observations about the 10 Commandments. Here are four more.

- Eight of the commands are negative (no other gods, no idols, don't take God's name in vain, no murder, no adultery, no stealing, no lying, no coveting), while two are positive (remember to rest, honor parents). Hebrew has two forms of negative command. One is used for specific, immediate situations, and the other for general prohibitions. The idea is, "*Don't ever...*" I'm reminded of the newspaper editor who asked one of his reporters to summarize the 10 Commandments for an article. After a few minutes, the reporter came back with one word scratched in large letters on a piece of paper: "DON'T!"
- Nine of the 10 Commandments are repeated or reinforced in the New Testament. The only one not reinforced is keeping the Sabbath.
- The commands are written as emphatic imperatives in the language of exclusive covenant loyalty.
- Deuteronomy 10:5 tells us Moses eventually put the commandments in the Ark of the Covenant to be kept in the most holy part of the Tabernacle: "***Then I turned and came down from the mountain and put the tablets in the ark that I had made. And there they are, as the LORD commanded me.***"

One God

Please turn to Exodus 20:1-3. The first commandment is found in verse 3 but I don't want to skip the set-up in verses 1-2: "***And God spoke all these words, saying, 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.'***"

We could say it like this: *If God is not Lord of all, He's not your Lord at all.* I see five truths.

1. God proclaims. The name for God here is *Elohim* which refers to Him as Creator, King, Judge, Lord and Savior. This name is actually in the plural form as a "*plural of majesty.*" Many believe this is an early reference to the Trinity as seen in Genesis 1:26: "***Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'***"

We see in verse 1 how God reveals Himself using words: ***“And God spoke all these words, saying...”*** One commentator said, *“The Divine Being Himself was the speaker, in tones so loud as to be heard – so distinct as to be intelligible by the whole multitude standing in the valleys below, amid the most appalling phenomena of agitated nature.”*

The word ***“spoke”*** means, *“to say or promise.”* ***“All”*** these words come from God and therefore have authority. Having been in Egypt for 400 years, God’s people needed God to speak. They had been *wowed* beyond measure in Exodus 19 but now they needed *words* to know who God was and what He wanted from them. Deuteronomy 4:33: ***“Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live?”***

2. God is powerful. In verse 2 God says: ***“I am the LORD...”*** This is the name *Yahweh*, which was how He revealed Himself to Moses in Exodus 3:14: ***“God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.”*** Dr. G. Campbell Morgan pointed out this name is a combination of three Hebrew words which mean, *“He that will be, He that is, He that was.”*

This title refers to God as the self-existent One who has no beginning and will have no end. Let’s unpack this name.

- Whenever you see the word LORD in all capital letters, it’s the name *Yahweh*.
- This name for God is used over 6,800 times in the Old Testament, three times more than *Elohim*.
- This name is also translated as *Jehovah*.
- It was considered so sacred, when scribes would write this name, they would take a bath beforehand and then destroy the pen afterward.
- This name was so revered it was only said out loud once a year on the Day of Atonement, and then only by the high priest in the Holy of Holies.
- As a way to set this name apart from any other name, when it was written the scribes used four consonants and left out the vowels, so people would not inadvertently take it in vain: Y_HW_H.

If God is not Lord of all, He’s not your Lord at all.

3. God is personal. Verse 2 continues: ***“your God.”*** The word ***“your”*** is the second person singular pronoun. God is powerful and He is also personal. He is majestic and yet I can say He is mine. He’s immense and He’s immanent. He’s never-ending and He’s near. He has revealed Himself so we can know Him relationally. This is summed up succinctly in Psalm 50:7: ***“I am God, your God.”*** Albert Mohler calls this *“First-person intimacy and first-person authority.”*

We see this personal relationship reinforced throughout the commandments. In verse 5: ***“...for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God...”*** In verse 7: ***“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God...”*** In verse 10: ***“...but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God...”*** And in verse 12: ***“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”***

4. God’s people are privileged. We’re told *who* God is and now we’re reminded *what* He has done. Look at the last part of verse 2: ***“Who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”*** As we learned last weekend, *love precedes law, and grace comes before the guardrails are given.* God rescued them *before* giving them requirements. Hosea 13:4: ***“But I am the Lord your God, [who brought you] from the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and besides me there is no Savior.”*** Ultimately, it’s *not about what I do. It’s about who He is.* It’s not about me performing. It’s all about who God is and what He has done.

This is so important to keep in mind. When we focus on our own redemption, on God’s amazing grace, how can we not obey Him? God made me. God paid for me. He purchased me. He bought and brought me out of slavery to sin. He owns me. He certainly has a right to lay down some regulations, doesn’t He?

The Apostle Paul picked up on this theme in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20: ***“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”***

Assuming most of us would say God is first in our lives, here’s a question: *“What’s number two to you?”* Go ahead and shout out your answers. Whatever you declared as number two is the biggest threat to who is number one.

5. God’s primary precept is prohibitive. Look now at verse 3: ***“You shall have no other gods before me.”*** Right at the beginning, God made clear what is forbidden. He did the same thing with Adam and Eve in Genesis 2:17: ***“But of the***

tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

This first command is spoken in the language of a sovereign to a servant. Here’s an obvious observation: The 10 Commandments begin with God, not with us. They start vertically, not horizontally. We must be at peace with God before our relationships with others will be right.

Note how personal this command is by looking at the words at the very beginning and the end: **“You”** (that’s the “singular” you) and **“Me”** (that’s God). God spoke to more than a million people at the base of the mountain not as a group, but to individual men and women, boys and girls. This is an intensely personal command from an immensely personal God.

The order of these words in Hebrew is strong: *“There shall not be to you any other gods before me.”* This is an unconditional prohibition: *“Do not ever”* or, *“Let there not be to thee.”* The first word not only prohibits polytheism and idolatry, but it also commands reverence, love and worship of God alone.

The Almighty demands absolute allegiance and does not allow any rivals. As Ryken says, *“God has always been a monotheist.”* The word **“before”** can mean *“above, over, against or in opposition to”* the face of God. One Hebrew scholar renders it this way: *“There shall absolutely not be other gods besides or before my face or person.”* The phrase **“before me”** can be understood in two ways.

- **Before My face.** In this sense, it means to have no other gods *“in front of Me”* or *“in My presence.”* Literally, it forbids us from bringing idols into the place God is worshipped.
- **In My face.** This phrase has the idea of putting something in someone’s face. When we don’t give God our total and exclusive allegiance, it’s like insulting Him to His face. God says in effect, *“You dare not bring even the acknowledgment of any other so-called god into My face.”*

It’s not that you can have other gods as long as God is your favorite. No other gods are allowed at all. There is to be no competition for our allegiance. Jesus quoted the essence of this command when He was tempted by the devil in Matthew 4:10: ***“Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.’”***

I found Kevin DeYoung's insight helpful: *"The God of the Bible is not simply interested in being recognized as a strong and mighty deity. That would not have been a controversial claim in the ancient world. Lots of people had lots of impressive gods and goddesses. What was controversial, and what set the Israelites apart from the other nations, was that their God demanded to be worshipped alone, as the only God, to the exclusion of all others."*

Jen Wilkin writes: *"The first word is more than a prohibition against worshipping lesser gods; it is an invitation into reality...why should Israel worship no other gods before God? Because there are no other gods."*

Listen to some verses from the Book of Isaiah which speak of how we are to worship God alone because there is no one else like Him. God made this plea over and over because time and again His people ended up worshipping false idols.

- **44:8:** *"Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses! **Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any.**"*
- **45:5-6:** *"**I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God.**"*
- **45:18:** *"For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (He is God!), who formed the earth and made it (He established it; He did not create it empty, He formed it to be inhabited!): **'I am the LORD, and there is no other.'**"*
- **45:21-22:** *"Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD? **And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. 'Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.'**"*

God doesn't want to be the chief thing in your life; He wants to be everything. *If God is not Lord of all, He's not your Lord at all.* Jesus said it like this in Matthew 6:24: *"No one can serve two masters...You cannot serve God and money."*

Warren Wiersbe offers this insight: *"For the Jews to worship another god would be to declare war on Jehovah and incur His wrath."* While we teach our children to share, there is one thing God will not share according to Isaiah 42:8: *"I am the*

Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.” He will not share the stage with anyone else. This harkens back to one of the phrases which arose out of the Reformation – *Soli Deo Gloria*, which means, “*Glory to God Alone.*”

For four centuries, God’s people were surrounded by polytheism and it had rubbed off on them. They prayed to the rain god when the ground was dry. When their wives were barren, they cried out to the fertility gods. But then they saw God’s amazing outpouring of power through the 10 plagues and the pyrotechnic explosion on Mount Sinai. What one commandment did God want them to hear first? That He is God and there is no other: “***You shall have no other gods before me.***”

Keeping the Commandment

John Calvin referred to the human heart as an “*idol factory.*” There have always been many gods vying for our attention and allegiance. Here are some gods from the pantheon of the past which are still bowed down to today.

- **Power.** The god *Baal* represented power but was put in his place by Elijah on the top of Mount Carmel.
- **Pleasure.** The idol *Ashtaroth* was worshipped through all sorts of sexual immorality. Pleasure is like a drug. It often requires more to get the same effect. This god is still bowed down to today through pornography and sex outside of biblical marriage.
- **Prosperity.** The Syrian deity called *mammon* was all about materialism and money. Someone referred to this god as the “gift of grab.”
- **Pragmatism.** *Molech* called worshippers to sacrifice their children by throwing them in the fire. When you count the babies sacrificed to the idol of abortion in America and add in those who are abused and neglected, it’s obvious Molech is alive and well today.
- **Play.** The Greek god *Hermes* represented athletic prowess and sport and *Nike* was the goddess of victory. Many in our culture today are worshipping at the shrine of sports. In fact, that’s why some families, even with Covid decreasing, are not gathering to worship on a regular basis. Someone said it like this: “*We worship our work, we work at our play, and we play at our worship.*”

Joy Davidman, who was the wife of C.S. Lewis, was spot on when she wrote: “*The modern idols are idols of sex, the state, science, and society.*”

In addition to these idols, our culture worships the false gods of relativism and pluralism where absolutes are absolutely out. Brothers and sisters, none of this is new. Ecclesiastes 1:9 says: ***“What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.”***

Here’s the deal. You and I are made to worship. If we don’t worship God alone, we will find something, or someone else to give ourselves to.

According to Isaiah 46:1-2, all “gods” other than the true God, will ultimately disappoint us and will eventually crush us. They can’t carry us: ***“Bel bows down, Nebo stoops; their idols are on beasts and livestock; these things you carry are burdens on weary beasts. They stoop and bow down together; they cannot save the burden, but themselves go into captivity.”***

1 Corinthians 8:4 says: ***“We know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ and that ‘there is no God but one.’”*** However, it’s not a harmless thing to give your life to a false god because according to 1 Corinthians 10:20, behind every idol is an evil spirit: ***“No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons.”*** False gods are designed to take everything you have, to leave you in bondage, crushed, and devastated.

Here’s some good news! God will gut your gods if you allow Him to do so. One of my favorite illustrations of this is found in 1 Samuel 5:1-4: ***“When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon. And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the Lord. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. But when they rose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the Lord, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him.”***

When we try to prop something up in our lives, out of love God knocks it down and shows how ineffective and lifeless it really is. If you want to be free from false gods, then bring the true God into your life. You don’t have to get rid of them on your own; in fact, you can’t because they’re too powerful.

Allow God to smash your gods. When you do, Dagon will be destroyed, Baal will be busted, Ashtaroth will be annihilated, Mammon will be mangled, Molech will

be no more, Zeus and Hermes will be gone and finally, your altar to self will be smashed to smithereens.

Sadly, instead of repenting, the people simply removed the Ark of the Covenant. They found it more convenient to get rid of God than to throw their dismantled deity away. Some of you have been doing the same thing. Instead of allowing God to get rid of the gods in your life, you look for ways to shut God down and tune Him out.

Let Him into the temple of your heart and He will destroy Dagon and whatever else lurks in there.

Jen Wilkin is spot on, *“The children of Yahweh today are not so different from the children of Yahweh then. Like Israel, we affirm that there are no other gods verbally and intellectually, but not practically. Practically, we live as polytheists.”*

Identifying false gods can be tricky, but there are a few questions that can help get the ball rolling:

1. Do I love or treasure anything or anyone more than God?
2. Do I prioritize anything or anyone before God?
3. Does anything bring me more pleasure than the things of God?
4. Do I place my identity in anything over my status as a child of God?
5. Do I look to anything or anyone to meet my needs instead of God?
6. Do I seek fulfillment or satisfaction from anything outside of God?
7. Do I seek comfort outside of God?

God demands your absolute affection. Origen, a third century theologian, said this: *“What each one honors before all else, what before all things he admires and loves, this for him is God.”* Puritan Thomas Watson said it like this: *“To love anything more than God, is to make it a god.”*

God demands your exclusive allegiance. Martin Luther once wrote these words: *“Whatever thy heart clings to and relies upon, that is properly thy God.”*

Choose for Yourselves

Incidentally, the breaking of this first command is very serious business. Because of their reliance upon false gods, Israel was exiled to Assyria, and years later, Judah was deported to Babylon.

It's so easy to spin out of control and end up in a ditch, isn't it? When you get out of one ditch do you wonder why you fall into another one? Isaiah 53:6 says: "***All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way...***"

→ **Play Video of Sheep Stuck in a Ditch**

Aren't you glad God keeps rescuing us even when we run away and fall into another rut? He has not left us alone. Listen to how Isaiah 53:6 ends: "***...And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.***"

To comply with the first commandment requires a definite and difficult choice to exclude every other affection. Joshua 24:14-15: "***Now therefore fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.***"

Later, after a false god named Baal is shown to be powerless, Elijah lays down a similar challenge in 1 Kings 18:21: "***How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him.***"

How can we be delivered from the worship of other gods and ultimately from the worship of ourselves? *Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, trust fully in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and follow Him the rest of your life.* Only when you are born again will you be released from bondage to other affections.

Listen to these verses which speak of Jesus Christ.

- Galatians 3:13: "***Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.'***"
- Romans 10:4: "***Christ is the end of the law for all who believe.***"
- 1 Timothy 2:5: "***For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.***"
- In John 14:1 Jesus says, "***Believe in God; believe also in me.***"

Are you ready to believe and receive Christ as your Savior right now? If so, pray this prayer with me: *“Jesus, thank You for fully keeping the commands because I haven’t and can’t keep them. I confess I am a sinner and repent of my sins. Thank You for bridging the divide between my unholy behavior and a holy God. I believe You paid the price for my sins by dying on the cross and You showed Your power by rising from the dead on the third day. I now receive You as my Savior, my Mediator, and my Lord. Come into my life and lead me to follow You faithfully from now on.”*

Interview with Safe Families