

Sermon File # 664

Scripture Text: Exodus 20:1-3; Scripture Reading: Mark 10:17-31

Sermon Title: *Commandment One: The Place to Begin*

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Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

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Commandment One: the Place to Begin

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to our text, as we begin a summertime series from the 10 Commandments. Last Sunday we looked at the Lord God's call to the Israelites to be his people of the covenant, and noted that we, through Christ, are included in a new and better covenant, which is imprinted on our hearts through the rebirth. The Israelites had been "saved by grace," when the Lord delivered them from Egyptian bondage and through the Sea. The covenant was God's promised blessings that would be conditional upon their obedience.

As we see in our text, as the people stood in worshipful awe at the base of Mt Sinai, the Lord spoke his 10 Commandments directly to them. The Decalogue is one of the best known sections of Scripture, and almost anyone you meet can recite at least one or two of these commandments. In my home country, the USA, you can find them posted still in public places, particularly in court houses and occasionally yet in a few public schools. The 10 Commandments are generally well known but not well understood.

The 10 Commandments are intended for God's covenant people, those who have received grace for a faith relationship with him. The Decalogue is not given to make "nice people" out of the general public (Enns, 212), although these laws have served to give moral guidelines to societies, institutions and governments. The 10 Commandments are a description of the kind of life that God intends for his special people of his covenant of salvation, and can be fully obeyed and fulfilled only by those in this faith relationship with him. In the new covenant, Jesus gives a fuller, more complete interpretation of these commandments, particularly in his Sermon on the Mount; so, in our study we will seek to look at, from our Lord Jesus' perspective, the kind of life that pleases God. And the first one is the logical place to begin, the foundational commandment.

Follow as I read **Exodus 20:1-3**. I will also read Mark's account (in **Mark 10:17-31**) of Jesus' encounter with the one who is commonly known as the rich young ruler, who is a negative example, being one who failed to obey this 1st Commandment.

A popular, unfortunate and inaccurate view of Christianity has been that of a religion of "Thou shalt not's," rules and regulations that restrain natural human appetites and impulses and deprive fun-loving people of their rights to freedom and happiness.

Joy Davidman, who was briefly before her death married to C S Lewis, relates the story of a missionary in a remote corner of the world, far removed from civilization, who was trying to convert a cannibal tribal chief. The "chief was very old," says Davidman, and "the missionary was very Old Testament—his version of Christianity leaned heavily on thou-shalt-not's." Yet the old chief listened to the missionary patiently.

"I do not understand," he said at last. 'You tell me that I must not take my neighbor's wife.' 'That's right,' said the missionary. 'Or his ivory, or his oxen.' 'Quite right.' 'And I must not dance the war dance and then ambush him on the trail and kill him.' 'Absolutely right!' 'But I cannot do any of these things!' said the (cannibal chief) regretfully. 'I am too old. To be old and to be Christian, they are the same thing!'" (Davidman, 13).

When we understand the purpose of God as expressed in these commandments, we'll see, not rules that restrict life to the equivalence of extreme old age or legalistic, joyless bondage, but we'll see them as the way toward life as our loving Creator and Redeemer designed and rescued it to be. Rather than depriving us of life, these commandments show and guide us in the way of becoming fully human (Motyer, 212). We'll see these commandments as the life that pleases God and the life God approves and blesses, to the fullness of our joy as well as his pleasure.

This 1st Commandment is foundational to all of the rest because it's rooted in the key to all ten, which is a relationship with the Lord God, the one who rescued the Israelites from bondage and who would provide for them on their way to the Promised Land. The God who spoke directly to the Israelites at Mt Sinai is the Lord

God, the everlasting, faithful and loving God who desires to give his life and full blessings to his people. The place to begin is to understand and obey this first commandment, which indicates, firstly, that...

There are many false gods...

The Israelites had been delivered from slavery in Egypt, and following the 400 years of bondage in “one of the most polytheistic cultures ever,” where they were introduced to various gods of fields, rivers, light and darkness, sun and storm. “Swearing their allegiance to the gods and goddesses of love and war,” the Egyptians “bowed down to worship idols in the form of men and beasts” (Ryken, 558).

Thus the Israelites were not in a monotheistic culture, but were being called to be monolatrous, to worship only the Lord God while surrounded by a plethora of gods (Enns, 413). Although the culture in which we live may not readily admit to being polytheistic, by every count it is a culture that worships at least as many gods as existed in ancient Egypt and Canaan. So just...

Who are these gods?

In this pluralistic, post-modern culture the most insulting accusation that can possibly be leveled against anyone is that he or she is bigoted, narrow and close-minded for holding to a strong, exclusive belief in one Supreme Being. The irony is that the pluralists are just as bigoted about their pluralism.

The world's religions offer a wide selection of gods, whether Allah of the Muslims, Buddha of the Buddhists or the cornucopia of gods of the Hindus. The vast array of possible gods to worship can be found within nations that formerly were predominantly Christian by confessions. In the US, there are more than 600 non-Christian religions (Ryken, 566), including satanic churches that worship the devil and his demons.

These are the metaphysical gods within religious systems, but by no means are they the only gods that people worship. Humankind, in the words of world evangelist Billy Graham, is incurably religious. Everyone worships something or someone, even if she or he worships her or himself.

Our god is whatever rules supreme in our lives, and takes the priority of our time, energy and resources. Our god can be our passions, such as sex, money or power, or achievement of personal, self-centered ambition. Just as the living God has the power to bless and curse, these lesser gods have the power to curse, and become demons in the hands of Satan himself. In his book on this subject, Richard Foster writes about the alluring, captivating and destructive power of money sex and power, saying that “No human realities have greater power to bless or to curse” (Foster, 1).

Even things that are morally neutral or which are intended for good can become destructive gods. We can make a god of our work and become greedy workaholics. Other potential addictions are alcohol, food or Internet and other media of pornography. Physical fitness and personal appearance can become a God when these obsessions begin to assume priority over everything else. We can make even our church careers a god to the neglect of our walk with the living God, time with our families and balance in our lives. Bonhoeffer made popular the term “religion-less Christianity,” but there is also a more dangerous “Christianity-less, or Christ-less religion,” and we observe this often within the confessing, evangelical church. We can continue to name all these possible gods, but then...

What do these gods demand of us?

A god is whoever or whatever we worship, and every god makes demands of us, whether these are time, physical and emotional strength and health, money, or the sacrifice of other valuable people and things. The god of this world uses these lesser gods to destroy our spiritual life. And those who profess to follow Christ, when they fall into worshipping false gods, lose their usefulness in the kingdom, their leadership with their families, and their witness to those around them. Certainly these lesser gods take from us our joy and peace.

The most destructive thing about worshipping other gods is the loss of the glory and honor due to the one true God. The God who has made himself known to us in the first and now the new covenant, the God of Mt Sinai and Mt Calvary, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, is worthy of all worship, glory and honor. He who created all things for his glory has the sole right to expect and to demand the worship of all creation, and particularly the crown of his creation, humankind. We are fully human only when we worship God and live in fellowship with him in love and obedience.

The entire law of God, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, are the perfect revelation of God’s will for us, and call us to faith in God’s grace and to grateful obedience to his perfect will for us. God so loves us that he has zeal for our exclusive allegiance and loyalty to him as our only God. God’s is zealous for our devotion and also is jealous when we share or mitigate the devotion that should be given to him exclusively. The Lord God’s jealousy or zeal for Israel at Sinai is the same for us today, where we are (Durham, 285).

“No other gods before me” could also be translated, “No other gods in opposition to me.” To worship another god in the wilderness of Canaan would be to declare war on God, and to incur his justified wrath (Wiersbe, 127). In the same way, when we allow other gods into our lives and hearts, we are doing so “in God’s face,” and are insulting the Holy One (Ryken, 559).

Now is the time to inventory our lives and see if there is another, a lesser god, whom we have allowed to gain mastery in our lives and usurp the place that must be reserved for God alone.

There *are* many false gods...

But only one true Lord God...

The Lord himself spoke to the Israelites at the base of Sinai, reminding them that he is the Lord, Yahweh, their God who brought them out of bondage in Egypt (2). This is the name the Lord gave to Moses as the name by which his people were to know him, the great "I Am" (3:13f). This 1st Commandment answers the question,

Who is the one true God?

The Lord God, the great I Am is the eternal Creator, the one who is before all things and who has always existed as the Triune God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is the one who created humankind to know, love, worship and obey him; yet when our ancestors fell, God revealed his unfathomable love and grace through the Christ Event. He sent his Son to us as his perfect, living Word, who spelled out for us his love and provided, through his death and resurrection, our eternal life and hope of glory in the everlasting kingdom.

This 1st Commandment demands we worship the God of our Lord Jesus Christ exclusively, as the only true God, the only Savior. As the Lord says through his Prophet Isaiah, "There is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me" (43:21). And God's incarnate Son, Jesus, made such audacious and exclusive claims as these:

"I tell you the truth,' Jesus answered, before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58).

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

These claims preclude all other so-called gods, whom Paul says are really not gods at all (1 Corinthians 8:5f). This makes our Christian faith very "narrow and exclusive." We can accept that opprobrium, knowing that there is no other person or god by whom one can be saved (Acts 4:12). But we don't have to accept the accusation we are thereby intolerant.

We certainly should accept diversity of beliefs in our culture and should respect other religions and philosophies. We must give these religions and ideologies the same respect and freedom of expression that we want for ourselves. But there's a crucial difference between intolerance and pluralism, and we as worshipers of the Lord God cannot be pluralistic but must be exclusively committed to the Gospel of Christ as the only hope for humankind.

We are made, redeemed and called to worship the Lord God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as the one true God.

And this 1st Commandment requires that we answer the question,

What does he demand of us?

The Lord God demands nothing less than first place in our lives. Although he is the God of grace and there is nothing we can do to earn our salvation, yet his grace is not cheap. To know God and receive the benefits of the cross and resurrection and the gift of forgiveness, peace with God and a new and eternal life, we must accept the demands of the covenant; and the place to begin is this 1st Commandment, to worship the Lord God alone. We must make Jesus the only Lord and Master, which was what the Lord was demanding of Israel.

James Smart writes of “the totalitarian nature of his claims,” saying,

“Our God is a jealous God. He will not share the worship of our hearts with anyone or anything; it must be concentrated upon him alone...When we conceal this uncompromising claim and offer the gifts of God—the good life, forgiveness, peace with God, spiritual security—at a lesser price, we make of our church a kind of bargain counter of salvation. We let family, nation, and all manner of importunate personal interests take the primary place in men’s lives and are content so long as they are willing to give God a place, even though it may be a subordinate one, unaware that we have betrayed our people into a fatal disorder. God will not take second place” (Quoted by Kelley, 113f).

We sin against God and his people when we present a cheap grace, bargain counter salvation. During the month of July in Belgium, the sales are going on in most of the stores. But the Gospel of God’s grace and the offer of his forgiveness and gift of eternal life is not “on sale” on a “bargain table.” What this 1st Commandment requires is making God our only God and Jesus the Lord of our life, which is something the rich young man in the Gospels was unwilling to do.

This young man claimed to obey the Commandments but had skipped over the first one. And Jesus knew he had failed to put God first in his life and was ill prepared to follow him as Lord. So Jesus commanded him to sell his possessions and give to the poor and then come and follow him. Jesus knew that his possessions had become his god, had taken possession of his soul. Only a miracle of God’s grace, Jesus then added, can enable the rich to forsake the god of money and wealth to follow him into the kingdom of God (Mark 10:17-27).

The disciples were amazed at Jesus’ saying about the human impossibility of the rich entering the kingdom (being influenced by the popular Jewish notion that material wealth was a sign of God’s special favor), and the answer Jesus gave is the key to obeying this 1st Commandment. How could the rich young man be delivered from his bondage to the god of wealth and be free to obey this 1st Commandment.

And also...

How can we worship and follow him?

Jesus answered that “with man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:27). The grace that delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, and the grace that raised Jesus from the grave is the grace that has the power to deliver us from whatever holds us captive and then enables us to put God first, and to eschew any other gods in our lives.

Only Jesus Christ himself perfectly obeyed this and all of the Commandments, and by his grace we receive his gift of righteousness. And the presence of Christ in us, as our personal Lord and Savior, enables us to put God first and to love him with our entire being.

All of the commandments are impossible to obey in the strength of our human flesh, i.e. ability and resolve, at least in the way Jesus interprets these commandments in the Sermon on the Mount. He gives us the power to live a righteous and holy life as he fills and controls us by the Holy Spirit.

Paul reminds us of the futility of trying to obey the law by our fleshly strength and resolve, as we see in Romans 7. The key is to live in the power of the Spirit, as described in Romans 8. James writes about how that trying to live in obedience to the law by our efforts is like looking in a mirror but not changing what we see. But James speaks of the “perfect law that gives freedom,” meaning the power God gives us to understand and also obey God’s word through his grace and power (James 1:22-25). Scripture tells us of that power being the blood of Christ, who cleanses us and enables us to live to please God (Hebrews 10:22; 1 John 1:7, 9). As one has said, the law is a mirror to show us our need, and you don’t wash yourself with a mirror. The blood of Christ and God’s Spirit are the cleansing and transforming power we need to change what we see in the mirror of the law (Wiersbe, 126).

Conclusion:

The only way we can obey even the 1st Commandment is to admit our need for God’s cleansing and his power and grace to enable us to turn away from all other gods in our lives and embrace and follow Jesus as our only Lord and Savior. By his grace and the Spirit we can learn to love God and to follow Jesus as our only Master.

Perhaps there are some of us here today who, like the rich young man, need to be delivered from bondage to another god. Something or someone else has first place, the place that should be given to Jesus alone. Unless Jesus Christ is Lord all the other commandments will be beyond your reach. This 1st Commandment is the place to begin. As Jesus told the disciples after his disappointing encounter with the rich young man, it’s humanly impossible to be set free from a god that has a grip on our heart or mind. But with God all things are possible.

The life that pleases God and one that he blesses with joy, peace and wholeness is a life that obeys the Commandments, beginning with the first one. To be a Christian, contrary to what the legalistic missionary was teaching the old chieftain, is not the same as being too old to disobey or to indulge in wasteful, self-destructive behavior. To be a child of God is to live under the Lordship of Christ in the freedom and power of the Holy Spirit. When we live before him in loving obedience, we discover true joy, peace, wholeness and freedom. We become truly human as children of the heavenly Father, redeemed by the Lord Jesus, in loving fellowship with the Triune God and with his people.

Today is the time and this is the place to begin a new life, a new walk with God in a life that pleases him and that receives the full measure of his joy, peace and all blessings. Begin to make the one God your only God and to follow Jesus as Lord.

Who is God in your life?

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. In light of this 1st Commandment, do you think it's possible for a non-believer to fully obey the 10 Commandments? Why or why not?
2. What is your definition of a god?
3. What are some of the gods you see in our culture?
4. What might be in your life that could possibly have become a god to you?
5. From Jesus' encounter with the rich young man (Mark 10:17-31), what was his god, and what was Jesus demanding of him?
6. What do you think Jesus might demand of you to release you from your "god" and for you to make Jesus your Lord and God?
7. Read Mark 10:27 and ask Jesus to give you grace to abandon your false, lesser god and to begin following Jesus as Lord and God in your life.

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