

God Gets First Place

Exodus 20:1-3

Pastor John Miller

Exodus 20:1-3 says, “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 bondage.” And here is Commandment number one: “You shall have no other gods before Me.”

Commandment number two is in verse 4: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image.” In verse 7, Commandment number three is, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” Commandment number four is, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,” verse 8. Commandment number five is, “Honor your father and our mother,” in verse 12. Commandment number six is in verse 13: “You shall not murder” or “kill.” Commandment number seven is, “You shall not commit adultery,” verse 14. In verse 15, Commandment number eight is, “You shall not steal.” Commandment number nine is, “You shall not bear false witness,” verse 16. And Commandment number ten is in verse 17: “You shall not covet.”

To introduce all these commandments, I found it quite a challenge to say all that can be said about them and compact it into this first message. But to introduce this series and this message, I want to ask three questions. The first question is, Why a study of the Ten Commandments? Why would we study these commandments, given by God to the nation of Israel, to a rag-tag bunch of slaves who came out of Egypt over 3,500 years ago? God gave these commandments to these people over 3,500 years ago out in the Sinai wilderness to a people who had been slaves in Egypt for 400 years. Why would we study them today?

Let me give you three reasons. Number one, because God spoke all these words. Verse 1 says, “And God spoke all these words, saying...” Why should we study the Ten Commandments? I recommend we study them, because God is the One who is speaking. So if God is speaking, we need to listen. We must listen reverently and obediently.

This is kind of a unique section of Scripture. It's not God giving His Word to a prophet who then proclaims it; it's not a historical narrative. It's actually the words of God Himself directly speaking to His people and giving them His commandments and covenants. So if God is speaking, I want to listen. And I want to listen reverently and obediently.

Back in 1980, the Supreme Court ruled that the Ten Commandments could not be posted on the walls of the public schools of the state of Kentucky. How sad. One of the reasons was that it is a religious display, and we can't have religion in the classroom. Some of the kids may see these Ten Commandments and actually be influenced by them. That would be horrible; wouldn't it?! “Honor your father and your mother.”

“Oh, we can't have that!”

“You shall not kill,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not bear false witness,” “You shall not commit

adultery.” Oh, that one had to go, for sure. So we’ve thrown God’s Law behind our backs. We have rejected God’s Laws.

Back in the early ‘60s, the problems in the high schools were chewing gum and talking in class. What horrible things! But compare that to today.

What do we expect? We take the Ten Commandments off the wall of our classrooms, and we teach the kids that they’ve evolved from premortal goo. Then we expect them to act and behave like they should?!

The second reason we should study the Ten Commandments is because they are commandments and not suggestions. God doesn’t suggest; God commands.

These were given, in context, to the nation of Israel, but they are universal in application. God gave them this moral Law, which is the foundation for all moral laws and ethics in the Western world. They are from God, the moral Lawgiver.

The third reason is that the Ten Commandments were written in stone by the finger of God. That indicates that they are immutable, like God Himself. So not only are they universal, but they are also immutable; they do not change. God didn’t write them with chalk on an erasable blackboard. God didn’t hand Moses a pencil and tell him, “Note there is an eraser on it. So if things change, times change, you can change My Laws.” No. God is immutable. God is the immutable Lawgiver. God’s Laws do not change; they are immutable.

And without God, there can be no transcendent, absolute, objective, moral standard. I wish I could scream that from the housetops. Why has the world gone so crazy? Because we’ve forgotten God. And we’ve certainly forgotten God’s Laws or God’s commandments. So the Ten Commandments start with God. God is the fixed, starting point.

I was reading about the North Star and about the ancient mariners out at sea at night before we had GPSs. They would actually fix their sight on the North Star, Polaris. It is at the very tip of the handle of the Little Dipper. It has a reputation of being the brightest star in the night sky. And to the naked eye, it never moves, but it does move a little bit. And it marks true north. So ancient mariners could get their bearings by it. You could never pass by the North Star; it was always a fixed point.

God is that North Star, figuratively. He is our fixed point by which we can judge all issues. How can we have absolute, moral standards? God exists and God has spoken. Without God and His Laws, we are hopelessly lost.

Perhaps there is no more important time in the history of our nation than now; to come back to God, back to His Word and back to these Ten Commandments. If only these were placed in every government office. If only these were placed in every school in our nation and in every home in our nation.

We will look at one of these commandments each week. Memorize one a week. As a family gather your children and memorize these Ten Commandments, these Laws given to us by God.

Without the Ten Commandments, we are left like Judges 17:6: "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." God's Laws are for our own good, to liberate us in order to love and to live.

My second main question is, What is the background and setting of the Ten Commandments? For that we go back to chapter 19, verses 1-6. "In the third month after the children of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on the same day, they came to the Wilderness of Sinai. For they had departed from Rephidim, had come to the Wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness. So Israel camped there before the mountain. And Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, 'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'" These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel."

In the context, the Israelites had come out of Egypt. That was the Passover. Three months would take them to Pentecost. They were in the Wilderness of Sinai. God met with Moses on the mountain; we know it was Mount Sinai. When God met with Moses on the mountain, there was lightning, thunder and smoke. All the people stood back because they were fearful.

God gave to Moses directly, on two tablets of stone engraved by the finger of God, these Ten Commandments. How marvelous that is! It was the same finger that wrote on the wall of Belshazzar's palace, "Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin." It was also the same finger that wrote in the sand in John 8, Jesus Christ's finger. It was that same finger that gave these Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai.

So it was three months after the Exodus that Moses received these Ten Commandments, because they were going to become a nation. God gave them His civil Laws, ceremonial Laws and then the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, His moral Laws.

All but one of these Ten Commandments is repeated in the New Testament. Only the fourth Commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy," is not repeated in the New Testament. The rest of the Ten Commandments have a parallel passage in the New Testament, to be applied to us as believers.

Now my third question is, What is the purpose of the Ten Commandments? There are three things. Number one, they are given to reveal God's holiness. The very nature and character of God is revealed in these Ten Commandments. Some people ask, "Well, why would we study the Ten Commandments?" Because we want to see that God is holy. Number two, they were given to restrain evil. Is it wrong to lie? Yes, God said it was. Is it wrong to steal? Yes.

Don't we need that one now in our nation! We have laws that have been passed in some of our

big cities that if you steal, you won't be prosecuted as long as the value of what you steal is under \$1,000. Really?! I would have loved that one in my heathen days! So we're not even enforcing theft laws. We're just letting people go crazy. "Smash and grab" is becoming very prevalent.

Is it wrong to commit adultery? Yes. And that's the one people want to erase. God said, "You shall not commit adultery." These are God's own words, written in stone. They are universal and unchanging.

And the third purpose of the Law or the Ten Commandments is to reveal our sin and our need for the Savior. God's Law reveals that we have sinned. So over the next ten weeks as we go through the Ten Commandments, I'm praying that we're squirming and sweating, that we're convicted of our sin under the Law of God.

You ask, "Why would you want us to have that experience?" Because I want it to drive you to Jesus, the Savior. That is what the Law does. It is like a mirror. You know, it's not always pleasant looking at yourself in a mirror. When I look in a mirror, it doesn't always do what I want it to do. But the problem is not the mirror. You may say, "I have to get a new mirror. Every time I look in this one, I'm ugly. I need one that helps me." You can buy all the mirrors you want, but they're not going to help you. The mirror is just revealing reality.

So God's Laws are like mirrors. They are held up to show us our sin. Even Jesus took them deeper on the Sermon on the Mount. He said, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." He also said, "You shall not murder...But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment." You've already committed murder in God's sight. These Laws are penetrating and convicting.

In Romans 7:7 and 9, Paul says, "I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet'....I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died."

In John 1:17, it says, "For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." So the Law drives us to Christ. Law by Moses, grace and truth by Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill." Jesus was born under the Law, He lived according to the Law and He died on the Cross to satisfy the demands of the Law. And now His righteousness is imputed to us. The Holy Spirit now fills us, so we are able to keep the Law. We "do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit," Romans 8:4. So the Law can be fulfilled in us, if we walk according to the Spirit.

Now the Law has two divisions. The first division is the first four Commandments. They deal with our relationship to God, our love for God and our reverence for God. This is where it all

starts. We must be vertically, properly related to God before we can be horizontally, properly related to others. The second division is the Fifth Commandment through the Tenth Commandment. These next six Commandments deal with our love for others. So the first tablet of stone deals with our love and reverence for God; the next tablet of stone deals with our love and respect for others.

Jesus was asked, "Which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus answered, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." So Jesus summarized the Ten Commandments as loving "God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" and loving "your neighbor as yourself." When we do these two things, it takes care of all the Commandments in the Decalogue.

Now we come to the First Commandment, verse 3. "You shall have no other gods before Me." It is simple but simply profound. It's full of truth. And I want you to note three things about this Commandment. First, it has an assertion: the reality of God. Second, it has a prohibition: the priority of God, God only. And third, it implies an invitation: the personality of God and the possession of God, that God can become my God.

First, the Commandment has an assertion, in verse 2. "I am the Lord your God." Sometimes we jump right into verse 3 when we look at the Commandments and forget the prelude, in verses 1-2. "God spoke all these words...I am the Lord your God." So it's God speaking. He identifies Himself as the great "I AM." "I am the Lord." "I am Jehovah" or "Yahweh." "I am the Lord your God." So the assertion here is the reality of God.

Nowhere in the Bible does it try to argue and defend the existence of God. Why is that? Because the Bible is the autobiography of God. If you were writing an autobiography, you wouldn't spend the first few chapters trying to prove that you were real. You'd just tell your life story.

So the Bible opens up in Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Do you realize all that is in that one verse—in the first chapter, first verse of the first book of the Bible? Let me give you seven things Genesis 1:1 refutes. Number one, it refutes atheism, because the universe was created by God. Number two, it refutes pantheism, for God is transcendent over what He created. Number three, it refutes polytheism, because one God created all things. Number four, it refutes materialism, for matter had a beginning. Number five, it refutes dualism, because God was alone when He created. Number six, it refutes humanism, because God, not man, is the ultimate reality. And number seven, it refutes evolutionism, because God created all things.

That's just the first verse of the Bible! So the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, starts with "I am the Lord your God"; it assumes the reality of God.

And let me remind you that without God, we have no fixed reference point. Without God, we don't know where we came from, we don't know why we're here and we don't know where we're going. We can't fathom how important it is to know and understand God. The more atheistic, the more humanistic, the more secular we become, the more trouble we have.

This is why it's so frustrating for me to watch the news. You see all these politicians blabbing about what's happening and what's gone wrong. The problems we have are a result of us having forgotten God. Some attribute George Washington to having said, "It's impossible to rightly govern without God, the Bible." I agree. Every nation that has rejected God has gone down.

So we need that fixed point. We need that "North Star," that sure Word from God. We need to believe in the reality of God. The Bible says, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" In the Hebrew, that verse literally says, "The fool has said in his heart, 'No God.'" So the fool is saying not only that God doesn't exist, but he's saying "No" to God. He's rejecting God Himself. So the reality of God starts with an assertion.

Secondly, the First Commandment has a prohibition. "You shall have no other gods before Me." This is the main thrust of the Command; it's a negative prohibition: "no other gods," no false gods instead of the true, living God. This conveys the priority and the preeminence of God. Nothing must come before God in our hearts and in our lives. God must have first place.

Does God have first place in your thoughts? Does He have first place in your heart, in your desires? Does He have first place in your passions? Are you committed to loving God and serving God? Jesus described it as "to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." There should not be anything above God in our hearts.

The danger for Israel was that they were coming out of Egypt and going into Canaan, which were both polytheistic. They had many gods. In Egypt, they worshipped all kinds of gods. All of the plagues God brought upon the Egyptians were attacks by the true God upon the false gods of Egypt. Then when the Israelites went into Canaan, the people worshipped Molech, Baal and other gods. They had multiple gods of their own creation.

Every person has a God or gods. We all worship someone or something. The question is, Is it the true and living God? Here in the First Commandment, God says that you must worship Him exclusively.

If we stop right there, you might say, "Well, what's His problem? Does He have a hang-up that He doesn't want any competition? God doesn't want anyone else to be worshipped? Why would He say to exclusively worship Him?" There are two reasons from the passage why God gives this First Commandment to worship Him exclusively. Number one, because of who He is, verse 2. "I am the Lord your God." He is the great "I AM." This is the Ego Eimi, the eternal, self-existent God.

God met with Moses in the desert at the burning bush before Israel's Exodus from Egypt. God

started a bush on fire, Moses saw it burning but it wasn't consumed. So Moses approached the bush, and God spoke to him from out of the burning bush. God told Moses, "Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground." God is holy. Then God told Moses, "Go to Pharaoh and command him to release My people." Moses tried to get out of it, but God said, "I will certainly be with you." Then Moses asked God, "When they ask me who sent me and what is His name, what should I say?" God said, "I AM WHO I AM. You shall say...I AM has sent me to you." God is actually saying, "Not I was, not I will be, but I AM." God is the eternal, self-existing God. He always has been, and He always will be.

This title was picked up by none other than Jesus Christ in the Gospels. In the Gospel of John, there are seven times where He said "I am." "I am the way, the truth and the life." "I am the resurrection and the life." "I am the door. I anyone enters by Me, he will be saved." "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser." "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst." Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

All the "I am's" of Jesus are laying claim to being the eternal, self-existent God, who in our text, is "the Lord," who is "Jehovah" or "Yahweh." He is the covenant-keeping God, the personal God, who loves, who redeems, who saves, who provides, who knows and who can meet our needs. He is your God. It speaks of the personality of God. He can be your God. What a marvelous truth that is.

Since He is our God, He is our Father, He gives us His Spirit, we become His sons and daughters and we cry, "Abba, Father!" Only He can satisfy.

In Psalm 115, it says that the gods of the heathen are vain. "They have mouths, but they do not speak; eyes they have, but they do not see." They carve a little god from stone, and they put eyes on their god, because they have eyes. "They have ears, but they do not hear; noses they have, but they do not smell; they have hands, but they do not handle; feet they have, but they do not walk." And the Bible says, "Those who make them are like them." If you worship a dead god, you become dead.

It's like a mannequin. They're creepy. And when you turn away from the true and living God, it's like trying to give a mannequin a hug; it doesn't respond because it's dead. So when you turn away from God, you're turning away from the true and living Jehovah, the great "I (AM."

In Jeremiah 2:13, God says, "My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water." Today we don't quite understand the concept of a cistern, because we just go to the sink, turn on the spigot and we get water. But in those days, they would carve out a bowl in a big slab of soft, limestone rock to hold water. When the rains came, the cistern would fill up with water, so they would have a water supply for weeks or months.

But turning from God, who is an artesian well, it was like their cistern would develop a crack so

the water would drain out of it. They would lose all their water. It was all in vain. This is what it is like when we turn away from God.

Everybody worships someone or something. It doesn't have to be a tiki made out of stone. We sometimes substitute self as our god in place of the true and living God. The Bible says that in the last days, "Men will be lovers of themselves." Self-love is the number one god in the world today. Second, we worship the god of mammon or money. Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." Then there is the god of pleasure; that's a very popular god today. People substitute pleasure as their god. We have the epicurean philosophy. We're practicing hedonism. We worship sex, food and wine. In Philippians 3:19, Paul said, "...whose god is their belly." Their belly becomes god. What an amazing thought. They're governed by their appetites.

Years ago there was a popular bumper sticker that said, "If it feels good, do it." I remember I was behind a car stopped at a red light that had that bumper sticker on the car. I wanted so much to rev my engine, pop my clutch and smash into the back of that car. But I didn't do it. I figured the guy would jump out of his car and say, "Why did you do that?! That's insane! You just smashed my car!" That would have felt so good. But that's what his sticker said: "If it feels good, do it."

We have that same mentality today. "If it feels good, do it." That's hedonism. That's epicureanism. It's the philosophy that pleasure is the chief good in life. Now there is pleasure in knowing God, but God must come first in our lives.

Then some worship the god of fashion. We have whole magazines and whole industries dedicated to fashion. We spend billions of dollars being fashion conscious. People are always wondering if what they are wearing is in vogue, is in style. If you just hang on to your clothes, they will be back in style in 20 years. And if you keep wearing your clothes, you'll be ahead of everybody else.

Have you noticed that when a new style comes in you say, "That's so dorky. That's so ugly. I'd never wear that." Then a few years later you're wearing it and think it's cool. But it's actually no longer cool; it's already out of style by then. So why not be cutting edge and be a dork and wear something that people think is stupid? This is my philosophy. But we get so wrapped up in having the right style and the right fashion.

Or maybe you worship the god of popularity. You want to be accepted, be popular, be liked. So you go on social media. We're all worried about what people think of us. It becomes our passion. It consumes our minds.

There is the god of possessions or materialism. We worship our homes and our cars. Some people's god has four wheels with mags. They shine it and polish it. It has dual carburetors. That becomes their god.

We may worship the god of sports. I remember years ago there were no sports on Sunday in America. Now we have “the church of the stadium of football.” It is filled every Sunday morning with thousands of people worshipping these men chasing a pigskin rolling around in the grass. They are bowing at the altar of sports.

We can also worship our families, our job, our occupations, our houses. These are false gods and cannot save. They are “broken cisterns that can hold no water.”

So why do we worship God exclusively? Because of who He is. The second reason we worship God exclusively is because of what He has done, verse 2. He said, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” So even before God gives the First Commandment, in verse 3, He tells us the reason why He should have exclusive worship: He brought them out of Egypt, out of bondage.

This is the doctrine of redemption. Israel was redeemed by God, the Lord Jehovah, and He was their God. We as believers are also redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. So this was a foreshadowing of our redemption when Jesus would die on the Cross, we would be spared the wrath of God, would be delivered from slavery to sin, would be adopted into the family of God and become His peculiar people.

I’m not saying God has finished dealing with Israel, but we, as the church, the people of God, have His Holy Spirit and have a relationship with God because of what Jesus has done in redeeming us.

Jesus would come from heaven, die on the Cross to redeem me, so how can I not love Him supremely and exclusively and only, “with all [my] heart, with all [my] soul, and with all [my] mind”?

Third, this First Commandment contains an invitation. It is implied and not stated. It is a positive implication. And every one of the Commandments contains a positive implication. Even though the Commandment say, “You shall not” repeatedly, they all have a positive implication.

R. Kent Hughes, in his excellent book *Disciplines of Grace*, calls this a “positive grace.” “It is the positive side of the negative prohibition, ‘You shall have no other gods before Me.’ The positive, clear implication is ‘You shall have Me.’” If God says “no other gods,” it means He becomes my God, and I become His child. I have a relationship with the Creator of all the universe. I have a love relationship with God, my Redeemer, my Savior and my Lord, Jesus Christ. So if He says “no other gods,” it means He will become our God. If we reject all false gods for the true and living God, then He becomes our own God.

In Psalm 63:1, the psalmist says, “O God, You are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You.” This is the positive side of the negative Commandment. So the implication is if I turn away from God and create my own gods to worship—myself, my career, my possessions, my passions, my popularity—then God is not “my God.” My god is vain; it cannot help me. When I

am in time of need and I cry out to my god, it has ears, but cannot hear, hands but cannot save. And the greatest time of need would be in death.

I've been at the death bed of many people when they die and never heard anyone cry out for a bigger house or a better car right before they die. "Oh, Visa or Master Card, save me!" It never happened. But I've heard many people cry out, "God, forgive me! God, help me! God, come into my heart. Be my Savior. Be my God. Forgive my sins. I want you in my life."

Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters." And the First Commandment is the call to choose.

When Elijah met with those who worshipped the false god Baal, he said to them, "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve," whether it was Baal or Jehovah. And we must make the same choice. This Commandment brings us face to face with the reality that we must choose who we will serve.

Who or what is the master passion of your life? Who or what are you living for? The true and living God must reign in your heart and in your life without a rival. God must have first place.

We need to pray and take some time to reflect on the First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me." We need to repent and turn back to the Lord, and He will forgive you and become your God.

There is an old hymn, one of my favorites, called My Jesus, I love Thee. The first stanza of the song says:

"My Jesus, I love Thee, I know Thou art mine;

For Thee all the follies of sin I resign;

My gracious Redeemer, my Savior art Thou;

If ever I love Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now."