

January 10, 2010
First Things First ... No Other Gods
Deuteronomy 5:1-7

"Suppose you decide to attend a symphony concert. You arrive ... and discover it's not the normal concert at all. You notice the timpani player seems to be having a clambake in his drum - clouds of steam curl above it. That seems rather surprising, but even worse, the tuba player has cabbages and cauliflowers growing quite nicely in his instrument. Intriguingly, the harpist seems to have laundry draped over her harp. The conductor comes on, notice all this, and insists the three musicians clean up their act. 'It won't do!' he tells them. 'I will not tolerate this.' So they get rid of the clambake, the vegetables, and the wash. Everything's fine, right?

"No, because they start to play, but as soon as the timpani player picks up his mallet, the trumpeter gets close to him and the drum player hits the fellow over the right ear with a resounding crack! This produces the wrong kind of sound ... The conductor says, 'Come on now! Cut it out and get your act together.' Now everything should be okay. Right?

"Not yet. The conductor raises his baton and the brass plays the Dead March, the woodwinds play a gavotte, and strings play Viennese waltzes. Each of these is very beautiful, but together they are totally chaotic. The conductor says, 'Stop that! We'll play Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.' Now the orchestra has a sense of direction. The conductor has sorted out the individual instruments; he's considered the relationship of one instrument to another, and he's developed a common theme." ¹

Imagine being part of such an orchestra! You want to play a great symphony - but the flautist is ironing his shirts! "And I have every right to do so," he stammers. You know the director wants to play Beethoven's 9th, but the bass player wants to play the blues! "Who says the conductor's the boss," she huffs.

Today's society can be a lot like that orchestra. As a culture, we value things like "self-discovery" and "self-exploration." Taken to their logical ends, what we mean by that is that we should all be free to do whatever we want, whenever we want, wherever we want, with whomever we want ... as long as it fits within the legal system we have established. Or not. We can also push the legal system further and further suggesting that our "rights" are preeminent, and we should not have to abide by arbitrary boundaries if we don't like them. We don't like "rules." We despise "authority." We see this happening in the news all the time, don't we?

To some extent that's good! There have been times in the past when rules were defined so narrowly human freedom was stifled! Unless you belonged to a particular religious group, you could not receive post-secondary education. Certain ethnic groups were considered inferior. Only certain people received healthcare. The "good old days" were not always so "good"!

¹ Stuart Briscoe, *The Ten Commandments* [Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1986], p.xv-xvi

Baptists have been on the front lines, envisioning a society where all people - regardless of religious affiliation, ethnicity, gender, or ability - are treated equally.

But we can take things too far, can we not? At some point we need to reach a consensus about what the "rules" ought to be. And that brings us to the Ten Commandments.

Where do the Ten Commandments come from?

The Ten Commandments do not simply come from thin air. They are not arbitrary rules to make our lives miserable! In the Old Testament, God established a *covenant* - a solemn, legally binding agreement - with Abraham, that his descendants would be the God's people, whom He would love, care for, and protect. God demonstrated his faithfulness to Abraham's children by miraculously delivering them from slavery in Egypt through the Passover and the parting of the Red Sea. As the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, quarreling and testing God (Exodus 17), God reaffirmed His covenant with the people. And God emphasized that His people have a responsibility in the covenant as well - to obey Him and keep covenant with Him (Exodus 19:1-5).

But how would the people do that? The heart of the covenant is love: (1) God's love for His people. And (2) His command: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength"* (Deuteronomy 6:5). But what does it mean to love God? What is love? We know that love is not really some warm, fuzzy feeling. It's not fundamentally some abstract romantic notion. Love is about action. It's a verb. We love God by showing that He is supreme in our lives - we do that by obeying what He commands (*"If you love me,"* says Jesus, *"you will obey what I command [John14:15]*). *"The people want to know how to love me?"* God asks Moses. *"Fine, I will give you ten practical ways that they can show they love me!"*

The other great theme in the covenant is: *"Love your neighbour as yourself"* (Leviticus 19:18). What does that mean? Who is my neighbour? How should I love him? *"Do the people want to know?"* God says. *"Fine, I'll include that in the Ten Commandments, too."*

The Ten Commandments, then, outline *our* part of the agreement, God's covenant with us, His people. They do so by answering two basic questions:

- How can we love God with all our heart, mind, and strength? (Commandments 1-4),
- How can we love our neighbor as ourselves? (Commandments 5-10)

This morning we begin looking at the first commandment! We begin with how we can love *God*! Loving other people is critically important, but first of all, we need to be concerned about our relationship with *God*! God models love for us! And it is from the strength of this relationship, through the power of the Holy Spirit, that we can love others! First things first ... God is first!

Who is this God who demands to be first?

The Ten Commandments begin with a statement of who God is: *"I am the LORD your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery. You must not have any other god*

but me." (Deuteronomy 5:6-7). Throughout history - and still today - people have believed and do believe in many different deities. When Israel's neighbours, the Canaanites, wanted good crops (or children), they sacrificed to the god/goddess of fertility. When faced with drought or flood, they prayed to gods of the weather. It kind of makes intuitive sense (many cultures do this); the Israelites were tempted to adopt the same principles.

Most of us today are more sophisticated than the Canaanites. When we want good crops, we go to Home Depot and buy more fertilizer - there's a chemical for everything! When we have health concerns, we go to our doctor or a book, or the internet. Or we look to the government to solve our problems. Stuart Briscoe observes, *"Living in our sophisticated, rational, skilled, technological society, we too forget the Lord. We find it so easy to develop a nominal attachment to him, pushing him more and more into the background as we follow the gods of society. It doesn't take long before he no longer holds the number-one spot."* It's true isn't it?

What other gods could there be?

"Whatever our heart is obsessed with," writes John Maxwell, *"that is our God ... This commandment calls for a life dominated by a relationship with God ..."*

Our hearts can be obsessed with all sorts of things ... Barbara Brown Taylor writes, *"I do not mean to make an idol (or god) of health, but it does seem to me that at least some of us have made an idol (or god) of exhaustion. The only time we know we have done enough is when we are running on empty and when the ones we love the most are the ones we see the least"* (in *Servant* [Fall 2000], p. 9). Work can become our god. Money can become our god. Our family can even become our god.

Philip Yancey muses, *"What modern idols (or gods) make God seem...trivial? What tends to reduce the surprise, the passion, the vitality of my relationship with God? Most days I am not so conscious of choosing between a god and God; the alternatives do not present themselves so clearly. Rather, I find God edged out by a series of small distractions. A car that needs repair, last minute plans for an upcoming trip, a leaky gutter, a friend's wedding - these distractions, mere trivialities, may lead to a form of forgetfulness that resembles idolatry (worshipping other gods) in its most dangerous form. The busyness of life, including all its religious busyness, can crowd out God. I confess that some days I meet people, work, make decisions, talk on the phone, all without giving God a single thought."*

Who is this God who demands to be first? Our God is not some abstract philosophical idea. He is the God who does things. He is the God who has shown us love as a verb - in action. He is the God who delivered the Israelites from Egypt. He is the God who showed His love to us, supremely in Jesus Christ! God became a human being in Jesus, so that each of us could know and understand God in a personal way. Jesus died on the cross for us, to save us from our unholiness and sinfulness, so that that perfect personal relationship between God and ourselves is possible. He is the one who rose from the dead. He is the God who lives in our lives in the present. The question for us is "Do we have any gods before him?" Has He been crowded out?

"Love" is a verb - it requires action

Does the fact that you believe Jesus is God, and God is real - the one, true God - make a practical difference in your life? *"This commandment,"* writes John Maxwell, *calls for a life dominated by a relationship with God ... God must control every area of our lives. He must dominate our checkbook and fill our calendar."*

In practice, is God your god? With what is your heart obsessed? What controls and influences the decision you make in your life? Is it God? Or something else? The "other things" may be very good ... concern about a secure retirement ... concern about our family ... concern about our career ... concern about our health ... But we can be so concerned about the "good" things we forget the "best" thing of all - God! *"Don't worry so much about everyday life!"* says Jesus, *"Why be no different from those who don't believe in God - they spend so much time and energy worrying about these things! Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs! Live for Him! Seek first the Kingdom of God and He will give you what you need from day to day"* (Matthew 6:25, 32-33).

Think of your life as having a throne at the centre of it. On the throne sits whoever or whatever is most important to you. It is the person, thing, or value that you consult before you make any major decision. Maybe it's another person. Maybe it's your financial security. Maybe it's your popularity. Maybe it's your goals for the future. Maybe it's yourself - your own sense of self-fulfillment. We may believe in Jesus, intellectually, as God, but maybe - for all practical purposes - He is outside our lives. We get frustrated. We feel guilty and unhappy spiritually. We feel disillusioned with faith and with church.

What if I invite Jesus to occupy the throne of my life? What if He is the One I consult before I make any major decision? I can choose to invite Him to direct my life. I can choose to submit my "self" to His authority. Life becomes more harmonious and vibrant!

Which description fits your life? Is "self" or something else - other than God - on the throne? Or is Jesus on the throne? Letting God take control of your life is the most significant decision you can ever make. It's not enough just to agree intellectually that Jesus is the Son of God and that He died on the cross for our sins, we need to make the personal commitment to life that. It's about faith. It's also about a choice - an act of the will - to allow God to become Lord of our lives. It's a one-time decision. It's also a daily decision ... Every day, every moment, we have to choose - who is on the throne? Who is making my choices?

©2009 by Bruce Martin
First Baptist Church
1614 - 5th Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3
(403) 327-2082
bruce@firsttb.net