

Putting God First
Text: Exodus 20:1-7
Series: Book of Exodus [#14]
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Theme: **Putting God First Means Giving Him Exclusive Supremacy.**

Introduction

The Ten Commandments are widely agreed to be a central part of Scripture. One Old Testament scholar states they may be,

“with the possible exception of some of the stories in Genesis or Psalm 23 ... the most widely known portion of Scripture in all of the Old Testament. These verses have been read, pondered, and memorized more than almost any others. Even on the popular level in today’s supposed post-Christian culture, the average person on the street has at least some passing acquaintance with what these laws contain and from where they originated.”¹

He might be a bit optimistic. A survey done in the United States in 2007 found that 80% of respondents could name the Big Mac’s primary ingredient — two all-beef patties — but less than 60% knew the commandment “thou shalt not kill.” 62% knew the Big Mac has a pickle, but only 45% the commandment “honor thy father and mother.” 25% could name all seven ingredients of the Big Mac, but only 14% could accurately list all Ten Commandments.² And it is not just in the United States. In a poll done across England and Wales less than 5% could name all the Ten Commandments, and 16% could not name any.³

Today we are taking the first of three looks at the Ten Commandments, with commandments one through three. The scene is Israel meeting with God at Mt. Sinai. We saw the preparation for this last week in chapter 19. God descended in a very dramatic way. Now chapter 20 opens,

“Then 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’.
(1-2)

God spoke “all these words” to the whole nation gathered there.

God’s covenant with Israel was similar to patterns kings of that time used in making covenants with their people. The Ten Commandments set out the foundational expectations while details follow in the next chapters. God did not give Israel the Ten Commandments and Law as a means to salvation, but as directions of how to relate to Him and each other. The basic truths are timeless — we see them in Genesis before Israel was a nation and in the New Testament. The Ten Commandments state important truth for us.

The first three Commandments are about God and how we are to relate to Him. They underscore the necessity of *putting God first*. That is more easily said than understood, and more easily understood than done. In a nutshell, *putting God first means giving Him exclusive supremacy*. Let's go to verse three and the first Commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me."

No Other Gods.

We need to start with clearing up the language a bit. "No other gods before me" might sound unclear to us. Does it mean that other gods actually exist as real beings and that we are only to worship one god? Does it mean we can worship other gods as long as they are beneath God? Or does it mean that we are not to have or worship any god but the one and only true and living God?

The ideas in the word translated "before" are to *have beside, in addition to, together with, or against, in opposition to*. God is saying "You are not to have any so-called gods in addition to or in opposition to Me." God is the only living God. He does not allow His people to dabble with any so-called gods. He tolerates no rivals. *Putting God first means giving Him exclusive supremacy*.

Israel had lived in Egypt for 430 years where the Pharaoh was viewed as a god and the people had over 2,000 gods. While the numbers varied, that was the pattern of the ancient world—different gods for different purposes. Israel had lived as a separate people in Egypt, but they were influenced by Egyptian culture. The first, foundational commandment God gives them is "No other gods!"

Before you quickly check the box "No other gods" and are ready to move on, we need to take this a bit farther and explore the implications of this statement. A god is someone or something I worship, follow and serve. God is saying that we are to worship, follow and serve Him—only Him. This goes beyond man-made *gods*. When any thing or person, when any hope or dream becomes my focus, that becomes a god to me. Good things can take the place of God—family, work, career and causes, to name just a few. God says "Put Me first with no rivals!"

One of the greatest dangers for both Israel then and us today is to *add gods*. Israel certainly did that as they added some of the man-made gods of their region alongside the worship of God. But they and we do it in other ways as well. We can divide our heart, trusting in God but also trusting in money, position and success. We can compartmentalize our relationship with God. We will give Him Sunday, at least part of it, and pursue our own directions the rest of the week. Or, we will let Him be Lord of lords and King of kings in our times of worship, fellowship and service, but follow our own way or flow downstream with our culture in the other times.

Having no other gods means that we are totally dependent on God, that we do not have divided, compartmentalized, half-hearted allegiance. God rejects all these attempts. As well, they don't work. In conclusion to His teaching about money and earthly treasures, Jesus said,

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6:24).

Let’s look at this from the positive. In Deuteronomy 6:4 Moses told Israel, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” In Matthew 22 a scribe asked Jesus,

“‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus answered, ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment” (verses 36-38).

You see, you cannot look at the First Commandment and say, “I don’t follow the gods of any man-made religion,” and then check the box and move on. *Putting God first means giving Him exclusive supremacy.*

Building on this, we move to the Second Commandment.

No Idols.

Let’s pick it up at verse 4.

“You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments” (4-6).

Some traditions, such as Roman Catholic and Lutheran, see this as part of the first commandment, and then split verse 17 into two commandments. But it is distinct, even though the implications and applications overlap. The First Commandment, “No other gods,” instructs us to worship only the one true and living God. The Second Commandment, “No idols,” instructs us on how we are and are not to worship God.

We recognize that the Bible frequently uses *gods* and *idols* interchangeably. In fact, much of the discussion on the Second Commandment deals with idols as gods. Today I want us to keep close to the thrust of the Second Commandment which is, again, how we are and are not to worship the one true God—that we are not to use any man-made images of God.

There are a number of questions we can ask here. Let’s start with “What idols?” We know that God did not forbid making and using any objects or images in worship. For example, there were two gold images of angels on the ark in the Tabernacle (25:18-20). What we have here is an express and total ban on making any images, idols or representations of God and using them in worship. One definition of an idol is that an idol is “a material object representing a deity to which religious worship is directed.”⁴

When we get to chapter 32, the people gave up on Moses ever coming down from the mountain, gathered before Aaron and said,

“Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”

Aaron had them bring him all their gold rings. He melted them down and fashioned a calf. Then he said to them, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.” They proceeded to sacrifice and have “a feast to the LORD” before it. Aaron did not invent a new god. He fashioned a calf to represent God, to *help them focus* in their worship. God, to say the least, was not pleased. Later Moses told the people,

“watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire, so that you do not act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure...” (Deuteronomy 4:15-16).

Do we use objects in worship today which are idols? We know that some traditions have icons, that is pictures or images, they use and venerate in worship. Is there really a difference between a molten calf and a picture? But then, some would say, “What about the pictures of Jesus? What about Michelangelo’s fresco of God creating Adam and other great works of art? What about stained glass windows? What about our north window of Christ knocking at the door, and the other two of Him as the good shepherd and praying in the garden?” We need to be cautious here, and will come back to this in a moment. The bottom line is *no idols*. We are not to make or use any visual representation of God in worshiping Him.

A second question is “Why? Why no idols?” The basic answer is that God says “Don’t do it!” Why does He say that? One reason is that any picture or image we make cannot accurately portray God as He is. He is Spirit. He is the invisible God (Colossians 1:16; 1 Timothy 1:17). All images then are not true representations of Him. What about the pictures of Jesus we see? Colossians 1:16 tells us “He is image of the invisible God.” Since Jesus did not leave us a portrait, the pictures we have portray Him according to the artist’s personal, cultural, ethnic, racial and historical perspective and are not, cannot be accurate. We need to take care so that our thoughts about Jesus are not focused on those pictures, but on the truth about Christ in the Bible.

Another reason flows from this. Our knowledge and worship of Christ should be centered in the inspired Word of God. God gave Israel and us His Word, not idols, to know Him and guide our worship.

A third reason for not using any images and icons in worship is that they very easily become not just an aid to worship, but that which is worshiped. People around the world make idols to remind them of their gods, but then end up seeing the idol as at least an extension of, if not the god itself. Relics, icons and certain places are treated as focal points of hearing from God and receiving His grace.

We are not to use any visual representation of God in worshiping Him. Since this commandment deals with images for and in worship, it does not ban all pictures of Jesus.

It does call for care on the part of churches and individuals as to the why, what and how of using any images of God.

How we respond to this Commandment has consequences. Go back to verse 5.

“You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me ...”

God’s jealousy is not like our envy. It is His committed action to defend His holiness and His committed love to keep His people pure and devoted to Him.

When God says He visits the “iniquity of the fathers on the children”, He leaves us with some questions. The clear teaching of Scripture is that each person is responsible for his or her own sin and that God does not punish one for the sins of another. For example, Deuteronomy 24:16 says “Fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin.” The Second Commandment tells us that when we disobey God we are guilty of that sin, and this pattern and lack of knowledge of the truth continues after us. Each one is responsible for himself, but also impacts those around and after him, even for generations. That is how God orders this world.

But there also is God’s promise of hope for all when He tells us in verse six that He shows “lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.” No matter what your parents, grandparents and great-grandparents may have believed, no matter what you yourself have done, God shows His lovingkindness to you and all who love Him and keep His commandments. Remember that Jesus told us that those who love Him are those who keep His commandments (John 14:15, 21, 23). *Putting God first means giving Him exclusive supremacy.* We see this also in the Third Commandment. There is to be no misuse of His name.

No Misuse Of God’s Name.

Drop down to verse 7. “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.” Let’s clarify the language here a bit, in particular, three words. The first is the word “take” — “You shall not *take* the name of the LORD your God in vain.” It’s basic idea is to lift, carry or take. When used of language, it basically means “to speak.” For example, in Numbers 23:7 we read that “Balaam *took up* his discourse [began his speech] and said...” It covers all aspects and kinds of speech.

The second word to clarify is “name” — “the *name* of the LORD your God.” A name indicates identity. But it is more than a label. The name “Christian” *describes* someone who has recognized Jesus Christ as God the Son, God’s Savior from sin to life, and who has accepted God’s grace in Jesus, has been forgiven, been given life and an unending relationship with God ... and so much more! There is a lot in this name *Christian*.

There is even more in the name of the LORD our God. He is the eternal, holy, loving, righteous, all-knowing, all-wise, all-powerful, faithful, true, gracious and merciful God ... *and*

so much more! In Ezekiel 39:25 God says “Now I shall restore the fortunes of Jacob and have mercy on the house of Israel; and [*now get this*] *I shall be jealous for My holy name.*” When we speak of God, when we use His name, we are speaking of who He is, not just using a label. God protects and defends His name, His character.

The third word to clarify is “vain” — “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in *vain.*” This word means to be empty, to have no real substance, nothing solid. It also means to be false. To not tell the truth. Lying is saying something that has no substance of, is empty of truth. We see this in the opening verse of chapter 23 where this word is used, “You shall not bear a *false* [vain, empty of truth] report.” And, it means to be worthless. If what I am telling you is not the truth, it is worthless.

Taking God’s name in vain, misusing it, covers many things. Yes, it includes swearing or profanity that uses His name. Such use, whether by habit or whatever intent, is disrespectful to God who *is* “jealous for [His] name.”

It also includes what we call perjury. People then and now, formally and informally use oaths to reinforce that what they are saying is true. To lie when I say I am telling the truth “so help me God”, is something that God takes seriously. In Jesus’ day some of the religious experts made an art of oath taking, that is, devising rules and oaths which were binding and not binding. In Matthew 23 Jesus said,

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.’”

Again, “Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated” (16, 18). These people made a game out of it—create an oath that sounds like it is binding, but really isn’t.

Jesus cut through all of that. He said that in our everyday speech we should not need and should not use oaths to convince people we are telling the truth. He said, “Let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes,’ or ‘No, no’; anything beyond these is of evil” (Matthew 5:37). So, if we are truthful people who respect God and His name, we do not need to reinforce what we say with “the honest to God truth,” or even, “to tell the truth.”

A third area of taking God’s name in vain, of misusing it, is to use His name in careless, mindless speech. Frankly, there is all too much of that. How often do we use God’s name to fill in spaces, or thoughtlessly punctuate what we say and pray?

And then I also can use God’s name to try to enhance my perceived spirituality, or reinforce what I think. For example, saying “God led me to this,” or “God showed me that,” when in fact it was my own idea and I did not even look to God for direction.

So, we need to guard our language. God gives a warning here in verse 7, “the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.” In other words, no one gets away with it. God does not tell us what the punishment, judgment or discipline is specifically, or by type—that is, of course, part of His design here.

Beyond the warning to guard our language and the thoughts behind them, let's note two passages that are related to this as they talk about our speech in general terms. We begin with another warning or negative statement. Turn to James 3, picking it up at verse 3.

“Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.” (3-12)

Now for the positive, turn to Ephesians chapter 4, verse 29.

“Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.”

Yes, *putting God first* means we need to guard our speech.

Conclusion.

Putting God first means giving Him exclusive supremacy. That includes having no other gods, having no idols and not misusing God's name. Let's wrap this up by broadening our focus. First, remember Jesus' words we noted from Matthew 22,

“‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment.”

If we truly do this, we will be giving God His exclusive supremacy including in the things we have seen this morning.

Then, recall 1 Corinthians 10:31, “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God,” coupling it with Colossians 3:17, “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.” If we truly do this, we will be giving God His exclusive supremacy including in the things we have seen this morning.

As you spend time with God now, thank Him for His grace that reached down and redeemed you, that made it possible for you to put Him first, and so glorify Him. Then begin a soul-searching review to see where and how you are and are not putting God first, especially in the areas of truth we have seen today. Admit and confess the things that are not as they should be. Ask God to keep on convicting, prompting, encouraging and strengthening you to grow in putting Him first in all areas and moments of your life.

¹ Enns, Peter. *Exodus: The NIV Application Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000, p. 410.

² *Americans know Big Macs better than Ten Commandments*. 12 October 2007. 28 July 2009. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/lifestyleMolt/idUSN12238940200710>>.

³ Butler, Brad. *Ten Commandments Animated Movie*. Oct. 19, *Has Voices of Ben Kingsley, Elliot Gould, Christian Slater & Alfred Molina*. 12 October 2007. 28 July 2009. <http://www.pressreleasesonline.biz/pr/Ten_Commandments_Animated_Movie_Oct_19_Has_Voices_of_Ben_Kingsley_Elliot_Gould_Christian_Sla.php>.

⁴ Bromiley, Geoffrey W. *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982, Volume II, page 794.

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