

August 21 God Is One

Exodus 20:1-7

Let's begin our study of the Ten Commandments with a story. It is about a lawyer in a big firm. His goal was to become a senior partner. Early in his employment one of those senior partners took him to lunch. He was told that only a select few would ever make junior partner status, let alone senior. He was told if he wanted to achieve this goal he would need to start now. He was to make this his ultimate focus. He was to start dressing like a senior partner, taking only the cases that would make him look good and handing off others, if he could, to people who either were not on the way up or whose career he wanted to derail. He would need to spend much of his free time working. Sure, once he became a senior partner he could hand off all of the tedious work to others and he would have the time and money to do what he wanted, but for now it was work, work, and more work. He should never let family considerations affect his work and he should probably not take a vacation the first five years. His lunch date ended with the words, "Are you up to the challenge?"

Now this might be an extreme case but he was asked to make work his sole focus, the center of his life. He was asked to make work and success his god. This is why it is important to understand the Ten Commandments. Though they are very ancient they are addressing the human condition which hasn't changed! Today we are looking at the first three that ask us to make God the center of our lives.

Before we look at these three in depth let us examine, briefly, what the Ten Commandments were trying to do and why they were and are important. The Ten Commandments are among the most ancient laws known. Even more, they are the only set of ancient laws that are still seen as having value in defining and regulating morality and citizenship. They are part of the underpinning of our entire legal system. Growing up I had to memorize them and the Kings James Version has many of them starting with the phrase, "Thou shalt not" which easily leads us to thinking that they are nothing more than a bunch of rules telling us what we cannot do. In most cases their purpose was just the opposite. They were given to encourage certain behaviors that would lead people to a closer relationship with God and help forge a community of faith that was good, and moral. They were given to the people of Israel, a group recently freed from slavery. They were striving to become a nation, a nation following the God who had rescued them. They were struggling with what it

meant to be a good and faithful and moral community. These laws were given by God in love. They were shared not to scold and punish them when they broke them, but to help the people know what was expected and to see the value of living righteously.

We memorize them, we acknowledge their importance and yet, it's hard to see their relevance for today unless you are presented with an example like the one I began with. At first we think "I don't make idols to other gods and worship them." Then we hear what is demanded by some companies to get ahead and we wonder if work becomes our god. Since most of us are retired certain leisure activities or family commitments or you name whatever is your passion, can become so important that it functions as a god in our lives directing our activities and demanding obedience. We may not build a shrine and worship that particular god but its demands require that we give up much, including sometimes faith and compassion. I recently read a book titled "The Ten Commandments for Today" by Walter Harrelson. I will be sharing some of his ideas of why these commandments are still so valuable. Today we begin by looking at the first three.

These three commandments belong together. They all have to do with God's exclusive claim on the human community—as ancient Israel understood that claim. They heard it as God is One as in the only God. They likely developed from originally brief, pithy, statements summarizing those forms of human behavior that were simply not tolerable. They were shared not to tell you when you were wrong but to encourage you not to act in these ways. Since clarification of rules was as important then as it is today, additions were made to some of them to help people understand what the basic statement meant. Let's look at the three and see what form of behavior they were encouraging when shared and later written down and what it says for us today.

You must have no other Gods before me.

This commandment probably underwent three changes in basic meaning. Originally the commandment prohibited the worship of any deity except Israel's God. Other gods were there but not to be worshipped. Next it meant Israel's God is to be worshipped and those who worship other gods are not to be tolerated. This exclusive devotion is admirable but troubling. It is at this point that the wedding of religion and politics often occurs bringing

bigotry and intolerance. Finally it grew from actions and reactions to a call to faithfulness asking people to put God first in their life and devotion.

What does this say to us today? We still struggle with all three of these levels of devotion. Sometimes God, or at least the demands of faithfulness, are placed on an equal footing with all the other activities of life. When thinking about what to do on a Sunday, going to church has to compete with a whole bunch of other activities. We still hear the message of intolerance for those who do not believe as we do. But for most of us it is still a call to put God first in our lives. Living in such a diverse cultural mix, with so many not going to church or living by faith values, it is hard to be faithful. We have to ask daily and in all sorts of situations, "What would God want me to do?" This commandment is a constant reminder to be faithful.

You shall not make for yourself an idol.

For the ancients to make a three-dimensional representation of one's god was the almost universal practice of religion. It was meant to bring the presence and power of the deity close to them in daily life. I can imagine how hard it was for the people of Israel to not have an idol as the center of their worship experience when everyone else did. We see how often they went after other gods. Idol worship was straightforward. You do what you are told to do and you get blessings. Don't follow through and expect problems. It is a yes and no kind of existence. But it doesn't lead to much growth, it is fear based and ultimately it is destructive to self. This is why it was denounced.

Recently some scholars have added a new dimension to this story. They feel that if you take the Genesis creation story as foundational we see that we are made in the image of God. Therefore to make an image of God was forbidden because the only appropriate representation of deity in the creation was frail and imperfect humankind.

That is a mind expanding idea, isn't it? You are God's representation on earth. You are how people see God. We don't need an idol to represent God we are God's agents on earth. Let that idea move around in your head a bit. It leads to some interesting ideas.

Finally: You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.

What is misuse of God's name? For the ancients the name of God was sacred. You should not speak it, except in worship. It was a way of honoring the holiness of God. To wrongfully use God's name was to demean God!

Today, much more is intended than not cursing. It rules out any use of God's name to do harm to anyone. No one is to use the power of religion to gain personal or political advantage over others. Using religion to harm others is probably the greatest misuse of God's name today.

These three commandments are all challenging us to keep God central in our lives. It was a struggle for the people of Israel not only when they received the laws but throughout their history. It is still a struggle for us today.

To get back to the story I began with. The young lawyer went home that day and shared the conversation he had had with his wife. After some moments of silence she said, "Let's pray about it." Her prayer was simple, "Lord, help us to know what you would have us do." There was no immediate answer and there seemed to be nothing critical coming up at work so they decided to let go of their worry for the night and weekend. Monday morning came and he got a note about a big case coming up. He could see right away that it was one of those high profile cases that would bring him recognition in the company. He also realized that it would suck up all of his time. He had some vacation coming and he and his wife were looking forward to spending it with family. He said later that the answer to what to do was so clear it was as if God was talking to him. He realized that he did not want success if that was the price he had to pay. He turned down working on the case, realized that his upward momentum in that law firm was at an end and started looking for other work. He ultimately found a new job. It was in a small firm, the money was not as good, but the work was gratifying and everyone was encouraged to not get too busy because life was more a job. He kept God central and it helped ground him. That is what these commandments are all about.

So God is One! God wants no rivals, no monuments, no misuse of God's name in speech. We are reminded that we are God's image on earth and we need to live that way. It is challenging but ultimately it helps keep us focused on what it means to be a person of faith and values.