

September 8, 2013

The National Presbyterian Church

## **THE TEN COMMANDMENTS:**

### **Who's on First**

Genesis 1:1-9; Revelation 4:1-11

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In our sermons through the fall we are looking together at the Ten Commandments, the Commandments given by God to Moses and then through Moses to the people of Israel at a time somewhere around 3,500 years ago when they came out of slavery in Egypt and were heading on their way to the Promised Land. Between Egypt and slavery and the Promised Land there was a desert, a wilderness. And there in the desert, at a place called Sinai, God spoke to Moses and gave to Moses these Commandments for the people.

The image of Moses there at the mountain that we find in Exodus Chapters 19 and 20 is of a powerful God, a dominant God and in many ways a scary God. And there are some people who say, "I don't want to think of God like that. That is not the God that I want to worship." But this, nevertheless, is the God presented there as well as in our passage of scripture in Revelation 4. Yet, side by side with the awesome character of this powerful God, we find a God of enormous grace. A God of enormous grace, powerful enough to deliver people from slavery, and gracious enough to give these Commandments to His people, not so that they might have a standard that they can never keep (so he can say, "Aha, you fail!"), but so that through these standards, these Ten Commandments, his people will know how to live with each other in harmony and justice..

More perhaps than any other generation in recent years, we in the United States have been thinking as a people about how nations can be rebuilt. Without the rule of law there is chaos and there is self destruction. And these people, these slaves had had no rule of law except from some slave-master who told them what to do. Now they were on their own in the wilderness and God through Moses gives them these Ten Commandments and says, "*Here are the rules of the game. This is the game that I want you to play. Within these rules you will find your greatest joy, your greatest joy. I give them out of Grace. I am the God who brought you out of Egypt out of a house of slavery, and I give you these rules because you will find within these boundaries your greatest freedom, your greatest freedom.*"

This is what we looked at last Sunday as we began this series.

We now move on to look at the particular commandments, the Ten Commandments. We are going to be looking at all of them over the coming months; not necessarily in the order they were

written. There are different times and seasons in our church here, which will dictate when we look at one or another. But we are going this morning to begin with the first of the Commandments, the very first of the Commandments. So immediately after God has said in Exodus 20:1, "*I am the Lord your God who has brought you out of Egypt, out of slavery,*" that is, "I am the kind of God who wants to deliver you from slavery. This is who I was. This is who I always will be for you, a God who wants your greatest freedom" –he then goes on to say, "***You shall have no other gods before me.***" The First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me."

The First Commandment is a commandment about priorities: It's a command to sort out your priorities, and as you sort out your priorities, to make sure you have your first priority absolutely straight. And what is our first priority to be? It is to put God first. It is to put God first, not because God is an egomaniac, but because that's how life was created to be; that's what we were made for; that's how we function best. This is hard to do. It is not easy in the society in which we live to put God first, let alone to sort out our priorities. I mean, there is a clamor of voices around us *every day*, coming from this direction or that direction, saying, "*I should be the first thing your life. This is what you need to do in order to find happiness. Make this your first priority and you will win the game of life.*" The voices are there all around us and sometimes they want us want to cry out and say, "*Hush. This is all too much for me! I wish I could go back to a simpler time, a simpler age!*"

And our minds might go back, for example, to the story of Adam and Eve: we wish we were in the Garden of Eden where life was simple, and we didn't have all these choices, all this clamor and noise. Well, that's something I sometimes wish for, too. Surely it would be nice to go back! But, then again, even in the Garden of Eden it wasn't easy to make good choices! Indeed, the point of the story is precisely that even when life was simple, this choice, to sort out priorities and to put God first, was still a difficult choice to make, and Adam and Eve failed to make the right choice. God says to them, "*I've given you everything.*" God is gracious. "*All the trees in the garden you may eat of. I've given you work to do: tend the garden. There is only one thing you must not do. You must not eat the fruit of the 'Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.'*"

Philosophers have debated, "What exactly is the nature of this tree, this "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?" I would respond by saying that I'm not sure that it really matters, except that ***by virtue of that decree, God lays before Adam and Eve this First Commandment.*** That is, in speaking about fruit and in forbidding a particular fruit, God is saying, "*I've told you what to do. I've told you what not to do. Now will you follow what I say? Will you listen to my voice, or the voice of another? Will you make me God, number one, or not?*" And they don't. They listen to the voice of appetite. They listen to the voice of desire. They listen to the voice of each other. They listen to the voice that comes to them from the outside. They listen to another voice than the voice of God, and so death enters this world.

Even when life was easy the choice was hard. And yes, for us, in a sense, it's much harder. We live in this time and place with the clamor of so many voices directed at us. Back in 1967 a man by the name of Charles Hummel wrote a little booklet called *The Tyranny of the Urgent* (IVPress). It's a great title and it's a great little booklet, *The Tyranny of the Urgent*. His ideas may seem to be commonplace now, but back then I think they were powerfully new. Hummel said that we need to remember that there is a distinction between "the important" and "the urgent."

- The important are the things we really ought to be doing, but very often they don't seem be urgent so we don't make those choices and those decisions. We put off those decisions.
- But then there are the urgent things, the clamor of voices directed at us right here and now.

"No, you've got to do this. You've got to do that. You've got to do the next thing."

And he says that we have to stop, be still, and determine whether those things that seem urgent are really important or not. In other words, we need got to stop and prioritize. And then in the middle of this booklet he goes into a little pity party. He says (and I paraphrase):

"My home, my house should be a place of refuge from this ongoing debate." But he says, "I have this technology called a telephone in my house which keeps on ringing, and all these people calling are asking me to do this or that." (He's a college president. He's got people hounding him for this or that or the next thing). Yes! All because of the telephone! Well, I read this and I said to him in my mind, "You think you have it hard? This is a landline, in 1967, right? You don't have a cell phone. You don't have any fax machines (or teleprinter, at least not in your home). You don't have email, you don't have Twitter, you don't have Facebook. You have none of these things, and it was hard back in 1967? If it was hard for Adam and Eve, and for Charles Hummel, how much harder for us today?"

Well, every generation, of course, would say that, and, yes, it is hard. It's not easy. That's why God gives the commandment. There are other voices out there, and God says ... This is the one voice that should listen to above all others: "*You shall have no other Gods before me.*"

So how are we going to do this? Perhaps we will do it if we have more reasons as to why we should do it. Of course, the reason "God says so!" should be sufficient to claim our attention, but maybe there are other reasons, too, that will help us to sort out our priorities and choose to put God first. Indeed, I think there are such reasons, and in our remaining time, I'd like to share some of those reasons with you.

1. The first is what we might call **the Realistic Reason**. Why should we put God first? Well, because God is first. Because God by definition is "god" and there is no other.

- You hear this refrain especially in the Prophet Isaiah (see, for example Ch.44): there is no other god but God even when, and especially when there are many claimants to be God within our lives and within this world.
- You see it too in the Book of Revelation, written at a time when the Roman Empire was dominant, absolutely dominant, and the power of the Emperor seemed to have absolutely no

equal – like God! In this context, the chapter we read, Revelation Chapter 4 was written deliberately to be subversive to the power, the almighty all-encompassing power, of the Roman Empire; to speak a word of comfort to little “itty bitty” Christians in the midst of this secular environment, where every day they were being told by all the voices and messages around about them, *"Your God is not true. Your savior is not true. The power of the Roman Empire is the ultimate reality. The culture around you is the ultimate reality."*

And some of us know this message from our own culture that surrounds us. In Revelation 4 the central image is of God on a throne and the word "throne" is repeated eight times, deliberately, to remind those Christians, struggling and persecuted, that God is god, and there is no other. Though we may not see it now, one day we will see it clearly. So the realistic reason is this is the truth. Very simple, we want to live by that.

2. Related to that is what we might call **the Rust-out Reason**: that only God will not rust out! Choosing God as our first priority is to choose a priority that will never change; that will *never* change.

If we do get around to sorting out our priorities, there is always the possibility that we will choose a first priority which will not stand the test of time. And God says to us, "Don't do it. Don't settle for less than that which will last."

This summer in our sermons we looked at the Parables of Jesus, the stories of Jesus. And one of the Parables that Jesus tells is about a man, a foolish rich man, who places his wealth as his first priority. And once he does that, all of his other priorities follow suit. His next priority is to preserve his wealth. Then the next priority is to build buildings in which that wealth can be preserved, and on and on it goes, following his central priority. But God says to him, *"You fool. You are going to die and of what value will it be to you then?"* Don't settle priorities that will not last! The “rust-out reason” along with the “realistic reason.” BUT, God lasts: put God first! God alone is eternal, and our eternity depends on our connection with the Eternal God, the rust-out reason and then, in the third place, the Reformation reason.

3. **The Reformation Reason** takes us back to the 1600s, and to the days of our theological forefathers meeting together in Westminster in England, theologians. Many of them were what we would call “Puritans” and they wrote a set of documents called the *Westminster Standards*, which have impacted the Presbyterian Church ever since that time. In those standards there is a document called *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, a document of theological questions and answers, designed to help people understand the faith. The first question is one of the most critical questions that anybody can ask: What is our chief purpose in life? Literally, *"What is the chief end of man?"* To which these theologians respond, ***"The chief end of man is to glorify God*** (that is, keep the First Commandment, put God on first, hold God high above every other priority) ***"and enjoy God forever."***

The Puritans have received and awful lot of bad press. Some of it may be justified, but they were not all a joyless group of dour (relentlessly severe) people, who didn't want to have fun

themselves and who couldn't bear it when anybody else had fun either! In this foundational document they say the purpose of putting God first is our joy, our joy! This is what they say. When you do it, we will, in fact, find joy, *when* we keep the first commandment and glorify God. The Reformation reason, our joy, our self-interest. This is absolutely involved in God's passion for our keeping the first commandment. And this theme is picked up by Jesus in what we might call the "reward reason."

4. **The Reward Reason.** Looking at Jesus' own teaching, we see him picking up on this commandment when he says in Matthew 6 verse 33, "*Seek ye first the kingdom of God.*" That is, make God your king! Make God your king. Make God your emperor. Act as if God has a community, a kingdom, and expects you to serve him within it. Seek first the kingdom. Sort out your priorities.

Then what's the promise, what's the reward? Well, says Jesus, all the other issues that consume us, will be sorted out as well: "Everything you need will be added to you." Not what you want, but what you need will be taken care of. Sort out "number one" and the rest, like a jigsaw puzzle, will begin to slip into place. But if you don't sort out number one, the jumble, the clutter will remain. So we have from Jesus the reward reason, and then finally the rejoicing reason.

5. **The Rejoicing Reason:** not only our joy, our rejoicing, but God's joy, God's rejoicing! You and I have the power to bring God joy. When we put God first, we can bring a smile to God's face. The creator of the universe can smile because of you and me.

In the last ten days I had a grandchild born, my first granddaughter. Just picture this, and I think all of you can. A little baby in a little bassinette, just lying there doing absolutely nothing; perhaps a little squirm here or there, perhaps a little cry here or there. And all these old people like me standing around smiling, beaming. This child does nothing, nothing, she is just there "being," and yet has the power to change our lives. You and I have that same power with God! – to change God's heart, to bring a smile to the face of God.

Eric Liddell was a Scottish athlete who lived in the early part of the 1900s. Some of you may know him from the 1981 movie, *Chariots of Fire* (obviously, as a Scot, one of my favorite movies!). Eric Liddell won a Gold Medal in the Olympic Games in 1924. But there was a moment when he wasn't going to do that because he wanted to keep the Sabbath Day holy. For him that was Sunday, and he didn't want to run on a Sunday, and he didn't run in the race for which he was best qualified. He ran in another – and still won the Gold Medal. He was one of the greatest runners of his age, and was a faithful follower of Christ, who wanted to keep all the commandments, including the first: put God first.

On one occasion he described the gift that God had given to him like this. He said, "*God has made me for a purpose. It's bigger than running. God has made me for a purpose, but God also made me run fast and when I run fast I feel God's pleasure.*" I feel God's pleasure!

God made us so that we could bring joy to God, and feel God's pleasure. Even in the ordinary everyday secular things that we do, when we put God first. Not holy things, just your average everyday things: by doing them well "for the glory of God," we can bring a smile to the face of God. (see this theme explored in Psalm 104:31-34; John 8:29; and Colossians 1:10).

So here are some reasons other than "God just says it," which may lodge within our hearts and give us *more of an impetus* to keep the first commandment, to put God first. I hope they will.

But then practically and finally, How do we do this? even if we set this out to be our chosen priority, as we hear these things today and go our own ways back into the world of multiple voices, How do we keep putting God first?

I know of no other way than by setting aside time every day for God, every day for God. We may not always make it, but if this is our goal we will make it more often than not. It may not be an hour. It may not be half an hour. It may just be five minutes, but the very act of stopping and turning our thoughts to God, praying, listening to God's word has power to sort things out.

- Abraham, the forefather of our faith, did this when he entered the Promised Land. The scriptures tell us on a number of occasions he stopped and built an altar to God. (see Genesis 12:7-8, 13:4, 13:18, 22:9)
- Jesus did this. (see Matthew 14:23, 26:36, Mark 1:35, Luke 5:16, 6:12, 9:28). It was his custom (and you are here today doing this), to worship God once a week in the synagogue on the Sabbath Day. In this habit we are following the custom of our Lord Jesus Christ. But more than that, we also know that sometimes a great while before day he would go off by himself to pray (even the Son of God needed to stay focused, choosing habits that enabled him to keep God on first!) And then at the end of his life in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night when he was betrayed we find Jesus going off by himself taking time out to sort out his priorities when he was tempted not to put God first.

The Garden of Gethsemane is clearly a parallel story to the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In a different garden, but still with the same question and a tree (this time a cross) in focus: Whose voice will I listen to? And Jesus, just as they did, is wrestling with a voice he listens to: *Is it my will that will be done or God's will? Will I suffer and die on a cross for the sins of the world or will I go in a different direction?* This is tough. This is hard, but it is in setting time apart that Jesus sorts out his priorities and gets his life straight for you and me, declaring, painfully yet triumphantly: *"Not my will be done but thine."* *You're on first!* You shall have no other gods before me. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews (12) puts it this way: *"For the joy that was set before him, Christ endured the cross despising the pain, and is now seated at the right hand of God."* Thank God he made that choice in this time out.

So this is our calling. God is powerful but God is gracious. God always longs to deliver us from all kinds of slavery. He gives to us these Commandments for our good, our well-being so that we can play the game of life together. And right at the start he says, "*Sort out your priorities. Sort out your first priority. Put me on first:* I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods but me. May we hear God's word and through that word find life.

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