

BE LOYAL TO GOD**EXODUS 20:1-3**

Cheryl and I got to attend the Ohio State football game along with the Joiners yesterday courtesy of the Lamberts who were unable to use their tickets. We had a great time! I want you to imagine a friend inviting you to an Ohio State game on a future Saturday this fall and you ask him, "So who's playing?" He says, "I have no idea. No one told me." Odd answer, to be sure, but you decide to go anyway. You arrive at Ohio Stadium excited to watch a good game. You ask someone next to you in the line going into the stadium, "So who's playing?" He says, "They didn't say." You get to your seat and discover no one sitting around you has any idea who's playing today either. You feel very confused. A while later some activity starts down on the field. People come out wearing all different kinds of clothing, but no one has a football uniform on. No one has a ball. No one is running plays. Everyone is doing different things. Some are running up and down the field. Others are sitting or lying down in the middle of the field. The fans in the stands are doing different things, too. They sit wherever they want to sit. Some are cheering. Others are booing. Many aren't even watching the field at all. After about an hour of this aimless activity, you decide to go home feeling completely frustrated by what you'd witnessed and experienced.

Bizarre? Silly? Indeed, but not very different from our present culture. In today's world, playing by any set of rules isn't very popular. Rules, standards, commandments, or laws are scorned, ridiculed, and dismissed as either irrelevant or restrictive of personal freedom. But if it's silly to call what I described a moment ago as a "game," in any sense of the word, how much more foolish is it to approach the game of life with no understanding of and no respect for the rules? God's rules for the game of life are known as the Ten Commandments. This fall we're going to take ten Sundays to reflect on all ten of them. In our day and time, most people want suggestions or options on how best to live their lives. These ten statements are authoritative commands that – if followed - actually liberate you and me to find true success in life. They're liberating laws not shifting suggestions. I'm calling the message series "The Big Ten" – kind of a tongue in cheek play on the name of a certain athletic conference you might have heard of. The Ten Commandments are the real, eternal, and far more important Big Ten. They're God's Big Ten. Now, we're going to drill down on the first commandment today which is all about being loyal and putting God first. But let's read all of God's Big Ten right now. **READ, pp. 73-74.** So, let's begin by answering this question.

WHY DID GOD GIVE US THE TEN COMMANDMENTS?

Approximately 3500 years ago, God delivered the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Their leader, Moses, had a personal relationship with God. God gave Moses the Ten Commandments written down on two tablets of stone by God Himself. First, God gave us these commandments because He loves us deeply. The Hebrew word for law - "torah" - doesn't mean a law in the way we often think of that word. Instead, it means the kind of loving instruction a parent gives a child. That helps us better understand why eight out of God's Big Ten are expressed negatively. Some people ask, "Why aren't the commandments more positive? Why's God so negative?" Well, like any

good parent, God used language we can understand. If your toddler is about to touch a hot stove, you say, “Don’t touch the stove! Don’t do it!” You’re not scolding the child. But you’re not going to wait for the inevitably painful outcome either. Love prompts you to use language and a tone the child will quickly and completely understand.

In addition, by pointing out just a few things we should never do, God implied thousands of activities we can do. God told us here to avoid ten things in life: worshipping other gods, making an idol, using His name disrespectfully, refusing to honor His day, refusing to honor our parents, murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and being envious of others. God left you thousands of things you can do! God told us to avoid stuff like coveting, stealing, adultery, murder, lying, and idolatry not because they possess hidden delights He doesn’t want you to experience. Instead, He knows those activities only result in pain, misery, and destruction. So, He’s just like a loving mom or dad who says, “Don’t touch the stove! Don’t get too close to the cliff! Don’t cross the street without looking in both directions!” Why? They actually want you to enjoy your life as much as possible. God’s Big Ten are meant to enrich you not enslave you.

God intended these values to be known, internalized, and lived out by every person in every culture. They’re meant for everyone everywhere all of the time. It’s amazing how relevant God’s Big Ten still are in 2018. He gave them because He loves all people. When you break or neglect them, you invite disaster into your life. Every human problem out there – be it political, educational, psychological, economical, environmental, relational – is a spiritual problem ultimately. When you apply God’s Big Ten to any problem in your life, life gets better in that area. The greatness of Western culture is the fact it was largely founded on God’s Big Ten. The many attempts we see today to dismiss God from public life and to ignore His values and principles only chip away at that greatness relentlessly. It’s kind of like cut-flowers. They can be beautifully arranged in a vase on your table. You can keep them looking fresh for a while. But they die eventually because they’ve been severed from their roots. That’s what’s happening to American culture every day now, sadly enough.

Second, God gave us these commandments because He wants us to love Him. Yes, God wants a relationship with human beings, but not just any kind of relationship. He wants a covenantal relationship. “Covenant” is an important Bible word. A covenantal relationship is one in which promises are made and kept, expectations are shared and met, and faithfulness is expected and practiced. Marriage is a covenantal relationship. You make promises and keep them. You share expectations and meet them. You expect and practice faithfulness. When that happens, you’ll likely have a great marriage. But when you break promises, don’t meet agreed upon expectations, or fail at faithfulness, a marriage is doomed. You can always count on God to keep His promises and to be faithful to us. But entering into a relationship with God means we make promises to Him, we meet His expectations of us, and we practice faithfulness toward Him. What does that look like? It looks like the Ten Commandments. They’re kind of like a thermometer that measures our love for God. How can you know if you really love God? Warm feelings for God are good, but they don’t prove you love Him. Actions speak louder than words, right? Instead, when you actively and intentionally

make the effort to conform your lifestyle, behavior, and attitudes to God's Big Ten – that's a far more accurate measurement of how much you really love God.

Be careful right there. I'm not saying keeping God's Big Ten makes you right with God. They weren't given as a requirement for salvation, but rather as a response to the salvation we already possess. Now, as His grateful children, we don't ignore our Heavenly Father's standards. We gladly embrace them. We want to please the One who rescued us and made us a part of His forever family. But we're still like a toddler learning to walk. We stumble a lot. At times God's Big Ten remind us of the areas in which we fall. They can be like a mirror showing us the dirt on our faces. Our response is not to wallow in guilt, but to turn back to Jesus for cleansing. So the Ten Commandments continually point us back to Jesus and our need for a Savior. Let's move now from the general to the specific by answering a second question.

WHAT IS GOD'S FIRST REQUIREMENT FOR A RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM?

"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." (Ex 20:2-3 NLT) We could restate the first commandment there in verse 3 like this: put God first and keep Him first. But *why* should God occupy first place in your life? That question is answered in verse 2. He alone deserves it. "I am the Lord." Don't overlook that. That's a statement about *who* God is. "I am the sovereign ruler of the universe. I made it all. I sustain it all. I control it all. I AM." If we don't get this first commandment right, the rest of life is already messed up. Everything flows out of it. It's like if you button the wrong button at the top of your shirt. Every other button is subsequently thrown off. God's Big Ten start with the vertical - our relationship with God. Only after we get that right can we turn to the horizontal - our relationship with other people. Some people today want the second part of the Ten Commandments without the first. They agree that murder, adultery, stealing, and lying are all wrong. They want to keep this moral code without the necessity of a relationship with the God who Himself created morality. But if you cut out the author of life, it's hard to respect life. If you cut out the author of marriage, it's hard to keep marriage vows. If you cut out the author of truth, it's hard to tell the truth.

But here's something even greater. He's also a personal God. That's why he says, "I am the Lord *your* God." He made it personal for the Jewish people. "...who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery." At that time Egypt was *the* world power. Pharaoh was viewed as an all-powerful god. But Yahweh came along and said, "Let me show you who's really in charge." Remember the ten plagues? Remember how He opened up the Red Sea and let the Jewish people pass through. Remember how He then drowned Pharaoh and his army? God revealed Himself as both powerful and personal. So, did God deliver you and me from some tyrant who had made us slaves? Actually, yes, He did! The Bible says we were spiritual slaves. Sin, Satan, and death were the all-powerful tyrants that ruled our lives. God demolished the tyrannical power of sin, Satan, and death at the cross and empty tomb of Jesus. He is "*your* God," too. He's a personal God. He knows you, and He wants to be known by you.

The first commandment doesn't say, "You shall believe in God." The Bible never seeks to prove God's existence. It's simply assumed as an obvious matter of fact. It only devotes one verse to atheism, "Only fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'" (Ps. 14:1 NLT) Most people who say they don't believe in God simply mean they refuse to obey Him. They don't want God to be in charge and they don't want to be accountable to Him. I read about one father who was trying to teach his son God didn't exist. After he finished this long explanation of how everything around us "just happened," the little boy looked at him and said, "Daddy, do you think God knows we don't believe in Him?" Belief in God's existence is innate in the human heart, isn't it?

But believing in God isn't the same as putting Him first in your life. Most people believe God exists. Most people don't put God first, however. God said here, "'You must not have any other god but me.'" (Ex. 20:3 NLT) What does that mean? It means there's room for only one throne in your heart. God knew that when His people settled down in the Promised Land, there would be a growing temptation to see pagan gods and pagan worship as not all that bad after all. Why not worship Yahweh and Baal, too? Why not combine the worship practices of Yahweh with that of Asherah or Molech? What was the harm in that? Because, quite simply, there's room for only one throne in your heart.

But how is this relevant to our lives today? Yes, some of us may still struggle with the truth there's only one way to God. We may be tempted to believe the gods of Islam or Buddhism or Hinduism are all pretty much the same. That was indeed a powerful temptation the Israelites had to face, but for most of us, it's different. It's also true most people today don't have little statues in our homes we carved out and bow down to. Few of us have a golden calf in our backyard that we gather around to worship during a full moon. For most of us, "other gods" are idols of the heart. These are things in our lives to which we tend to give ultimate significance. A spouse. A child. A career. A job. Financial security. A way of life. A hobby. Being healthy. These are most often good things given to us by God, but somehow, because of our own twisted nature, we take these good gifts and we give them more importance than we should. They become idols – idols of the heart. God says, "I alone deserve first place in your life. Put Me first and keep Me first." And along with that principle comes a wonderful promise. "In everything you do, put God first, and he will direct you and crown your efforts with success." (Pro. 3:6 TLB) Do you want a truly successful life? Put God first. How about a truly successful marriage and family? Put God first. Real success in any area of life is the direct result of continually and intentionally putting and keeping God first.

I borrowed the following description of five ways to put and keep God first in your life. It forms the acrostic word F-I-R-S-T. For example, put God first in your finances. Jesus spoke more about money than He mentioned Heaven or Hell. God says what you do with money is the real test of your priorities in life. What if we all brought in our monthly bank statements next Sunday and shared them with each other? It would reveal our true priorities. There's a very simple way to put God first in your finances. Tithe your income to His work. The Bible says, "The purpose of tithing is to teach you always to put God first in your lives." (Dt. 24:13 TLB) God says if I'm at least tithing – that's 10%

of my income – I'm beginning to put God first in my life. And if He's not first in your finances, He's not really first in your life at all.

Our church's fiscal year ended June 30. For the first time in my years as your pastor, our church had a deficit. We spent more money than we took in – over \$41,000 more. Fortunately, in the past God's generous people and our leaders' wise stewardship allowed us to have a sufficient reserve to cover the debt. Did we have a mass exodus of people leaving our church last year? No. Attendance is about the same. Did we have a huge budget increase last year? Absolutely not. We didn't spend the total budget approved by the congregation. I've told you before I don't know what anyone gives. But here's what I do know. We didn't have a spending problem last year. We had a giving problem. I wonder if the Lord allowed this to happen because some of us here today – perhaps many of us here today – need to put God first in our finances. We start to rely on the faithfulness and sacrifice of others and make excuses why we don't tithe. If you're a member or regularly attending friend of this church – this is your spiritual home – I ask you in Jesus' Name to put God first in your finances. Tithe.

Put God first in all your interests. Put God first in your work, in your recreation, in the time you spend with your family, in anything and everything you do. The Bible says, "So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." (1 Cor. 10:31 NLT) How is that possible? One way is to do everything with a sincere attitude of gratitude. When you stop to thank God for what you have, for what you're able to do, for what you accomplish, for what you enjoy doing, you invite Him into that activity and you acknowledge His supremacy. Celebrate God's provision and see everything good in this life as coming from Him. Because it does.

Put God first in your relationships. First, pursue godly relationships. Find some people who take God seriously and want to become like Jesus. Join a Sunday Bible class or one of our small groups. Get involved in one of our discipleship triads. Second, avoid compromising relationships. The fact is if you want to put and keep God first in your life, some relationships are just dead wrong for you. Choose your closest friends carefully. If you're single, choose a spouse carefully. If you're married, cultivate that relationship and don't allow anyone else to become a threat to it. Third, build redemptive relationships. Jesus loved spiritually lost people. If you don't yet have a heart for lost people, ask God to get you one. Begin praying for some lost people in your life and ask God for the opportunity to share Jesus with them and lead them to faith in Him.

Put God first in your schedule. The Bible says, "So be very careful how you live.... Take full advantage of every day as you spend your life for his purposes." (Eph. 5:15-16 TPT) How do you make time for God? First, make a regular appointment to be alone with Him. Do it daily or several times a week. It can be anytime of the day. It can be just 10 minutes or much longer. Reflect on a passage in the Bible and then talk to God about the things on your heart. Second, submit your schedule to Him. They made a movie about Ray Kroc recently, the founder of McDonald's. The real Ray Kroc was once asked by a reporter what he believed in. Kroc said, "I believe in God, my family,

and McDonald's." Then, he added, "When I get to the office, I reverse the order." Are we guilty of the same thing? We can give God His due on Sunday, but then revert back to the world's values the rest of the week. Third, remember you will always have time to do God's will. God will never ask you to do more than you have time to do. Most of us have 25 things to do today and time to do about five of them. When you feel the stress and frustration of your schedule rise up within you, it's probably because you're trying to do more than God wants or has asked you to do.

Finally, put God first in your troubles. The Bible says, "Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you." (1 Pt. 5:7 NLT) If you do that, it means you invite God to release His power into your troubles, not exempt you from all troubles. You ask God to allow your troubles to help you grow and mature spiritually rather than just being these painful, meaningless events in your life. Don't waste your troubles. Ask God to use them for His glory and your ultimate good. All too many times when troubles come our way, prayer is our last resort rather than our first one. Make God your first option in a crisis – any crisis, every crisis. I think sometimes out of a false humility we don't want to bother God with our troubles. God says, "Please bother Me. I can handle all your troubles and everyone else's all that the same time. Bring them to Me." Or, as Jesus put it, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." (Mt. 11:28 NLT) Let's put God and keep God first in every area of life.

Just understand that loyalty to God often comes with a price. In 2004, Jim Caviezel was thirty-three when he played Jesus in the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. Caviezel is a follower of Jesus who says God called him to the acting profession. Before casting the actor to play Jesus, Mel Gibson - the film's producer and director - told the up-and-coming actor that the role might cost him his career. But Caviezel wanted to honor his Lord by portraying his life and death. Caviezel told Gibson, "We all have a cross to carry. I have to carry my own cross. If we don't carry our crosses, we are going to be crushed under the weight of it." As it has turned out, Caviezel's decision to carry the cross of Christ has definitely cost him career opportunities. Following his role in *The Passion of the Christ*, Caviezel's credits were anything but impressive. Not until the fall of 2011 did Caviezel land a part that resulted in a positive buzz. His role in a TV series, *Person of Interest*, has been well-received. The show came to an end in 2016. Caviezel said he doesn't worry about the career price he paid for playing Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ* - a global box-office smash that led to fewer, not more, film offers for him. He said the awards actors get here on Earth don't matter to him. His reward, he said, will come in Heaven. Caviezel said, "Jesus is as controversial now as he has ever been. Not much has changed in 2,000 years. We have to give up our names, our reputations, and our lives to speak the truth."

"You must not have any other god but me." Funny. Actors are not the first group of people you think of as being loyal followers of Jesus. But, as Jim Caviezel proves, you can be. Christians are simply people who put God first and keep God first in any and every arena of life and living. What about you? Are you putting God first in your life? Are you keeping God first in your life? The first commandment in God's Big Ten: Above all and in all – be loyal to the One who died and rose again for you.