

SERMON TITLE: "Ten Commandments 1 & 2: Worship God First & Only"
SERMON TEXT: Exodus 20:1-6
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 7, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

So, here we are on the first Sunday of 2018. The old has passed away; the New Year has come. If you're like me, you've not only put away your Christmas decorations, but you've made a resolution to limit the high calorie treats and take off some pounds. After indulging in the festivities of fall and winter holidays, my body is definitely ready for some discipline. I'm sure you know what I mean. For those who've abandoned exercise routines, it's time again to get up off the couch. For those who've had vacation time from school and work, it's time again to embrace those important endeavors. For those who've overspent their budgets on Christmas gifts and travel, it's time again to get frugal and pay the bills. Frivolity and freedom are good for a while, but we also need some routines and rules to guide us.

So, as we embark on this New Year, I thought it might be helpful for us to gain some structure from the Ten Commandments. In October, in anticipation of our church's tenth anniversary here at this location, I preached a sermon from Psalm 119 on the overall goodness of God's commandments. But, now that we've actually arrived at this anniversary year of 2018, we'll spend some time on the Ten Commandments themselves. Each Sunday, beginning today, we're going to talk about two of them. Today's pair is found in Exodus 20, verses three and four. As we consider "You shall have no other gods before me" and "You shall not make for yourself an idol," I invite you to consider what it might mean for us to worship God first and only.

1—IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

Let's begin by reviewing the experience of the ancient Hebrews. When the story of Moses and the Hebrew people begins in the book of Exodus, those chosen people of God were enslaved in Egypt. Pharaoh was forcing them to build his grand pyramids and palaces. When they complained, Pharaoh

oppressed them even further. And, when the Hebrews increased in number, the Pharaoh tried to kill off their babies. It was a miserable existence. So, when God raised up Moses to be their liberator and led them to safety on the other side of the sea, the Hebrews were very glad to shake off their constraints.

They reveled in their newfound freedom so much, however, that Moses knew they needed some guidance. So he went up on Mt. Sinai and had a long talk with God. That's when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments written on stone tablets. But, while Moses was gone, the Hebrew people became more and more unruly—to the point that they created a golden calf. They then offered sacrifices and worship to that inanimate object which they had made with their own hands. When Moses came down and saw them worshipping this idol, he became so angry that he threw down the stone tablets and broke them. Moses probably regretted that, since he then had to go back up the mountain so God could make another set. But, even after Moses returned, it took the Hebrew people a long time to get oriented to worshipping God first and only.

In a way, it seems strange to us today that the ancient Hebrews failed so badly in this regard, not just here in Exodus, but throughout their history. Over and over again in the Old Testament, we read about their struggle to keep their focus and priority on the one true God.

As Moses' successor Joshua was about to lead the Hebrew people across the Jordan River into the Promised Land, he asked them to choose: Would they serve the gods of their ancestors in a previous location or the gods of their contemporary neighbors? Or would they—like Joshua—choose to “revere the Lord, and serve God in sincerity and in faithfulness”?¹ Even though the people answered Joshua that they would be faithful to the Lord, the worship of other gods continued to be a source of temptation and spiritual downfall for the Jewish people. If you read First and Second Kings and First and Second Chronicles, you can see that many of their rulers led the people astray into the worship of idols and dependence on other gods and powers.

Meanwhile, Israel's prophets were constantly denouncing the people for their worship of idols and other gods. The Prophet Isaiah mocked the absurdity of idol worship by describing a man who cuts down a tree. With part of the tree, the man builds a fire to warm his body and bake his bread. With another part of the tree, the man carves an idol, to which he then bows down and prays, "Save me, for you are my god!"² The Prophet Ezekiel, likewise, judged the situation harshly when he indicated that the defeat and exile to Babylon was the consequence of Jewish disobedience and idol worship.³

2—GOD FIRST AND ONLY TODAY

So, the ancient Hebrews had a persistent problem with worshipping false gods and idols. But none of us believes like that today, right? We know that a little statue made of wood, metal, or plastic doesn't have any power. We would never make the mistake of thinking that something a human being had made was worthy of our worship, right? And most, if not all, of us would have a hard time believing in any divinities other than God. Frankly, in the 21st century, it's hard enough for most people to believe in even one God, let alone more than one.

And, yet, we must ask, what is our highest priority? What do we believe in? What do we trust? Even people who are atheists have some kind of ideology. They have principles by which they order their lives. They place their faith in some kind of system or understanding, some ethic or practice or people. Whether we're conscious of it or not, all of us put something first.

So, these commandments one and two ask us to consider what that priority, that first rule, that basic sense of reality is in our lives. Is it the belief that each person has to make their own way in the world? Is it that we're all in this together, and that we can expect and should give each other help? Is our main belief that fate rules everything, so there's no use trying? Or, is our priority our own gratification? Is it our allegiance to the almighty dollar? Is our highest value our status in society? Is our number one priority our freedom? Our recreation? Our family? Our addiction? Our job? Our friends? Our life of comfort? Is it our avoidance of conflict, fear, or pain?

Of course, just like ancient people could worship more than one god, we of the 21st century can easily have several priorities competing for our attention. We may defend our multiple priorities by insisting that God is there in the mix. But, as people of faith, in the monotheistic Judeo-Christian tradition, we have to be careful that we don't water down the one true God to the same level as many other things. We don't want to be cavalier in saying things like,

"Sure, God is important, but so is Tuesday morning exercise class."

"Sure, God is important, but right now I have to think about what's for dinner."

"Of course, I believe in God, but I also believe it's important to give 110% to my career."

"Certainly, God's rules and principles are important guides for living my life, but so is keeping up with my neighbors."

Do you hear what those statements imply? Yes, of course, there are many very good values competing for our attention, time, talent, energy, and resources. And we can't ignore all those values. In fact, we *dare not* ignore our health, our financial well-being, and our relationships. But only God can be God, and only God should be what we put first. That's what makes God be God to us. God has to be on such a higher plane and in a wholly-other category than all our other priorities so that we can clearly see that God is not only first, but only.

So, we have to ask ourselves if there is a clear preference to God in our choices of what we do, say, think, and support. And, when we think we're putting God first, are we sure that we're focusing on the right God? Or are we just following the lead of our culture or personal desires? To get that right takes some attention to God's teaching. Are we reading the Bible? Are we attending worship? Are we studying and following Jesus' teachings? Are we praying for divine help? Are we gaining strength, wisdom, and accountability from a community and tradition of faith? Are we extending God's love to the poor and the lowly? These are questions that will help us worship God first and only.

CONCLUSION

This week someone emailed me some cartoons about the Ten Commandments. In the cartoons, Moses had brought the Commandments as a gift from God to the Hebrews. In one frame, Moses is

holding the two stone tablets and trying without success to get the attention of his people, so he could instruct them. Instead, they were all gathered around a box marked “fragile.” Like little kids who’d rather play with the box than the Christmas toy itself, the Hebrews seemed to be much more interested in popping the bubble wrap in which God had supposedly sent the fragile stone tablets.

I guess there’s more than one way to break God’s commandments. We can do it by getting so angry that we throw down the stone tablets like Moses did, or we can break God’s commandments by being so distracted by other things that we never give God our full attention.

In this New Year, let’s try to embrace some structure. Let’s rein in our tendencies to scatter our interests, affections, and energies on a lot of different things that may not be all that important. Let’s worship God first and only.

¹ Josh. 24:14.

² Is. 44:13-17.

³ For example, Ezekiel 36:18.