

Who's on First?
The First Commandment
Exodus 20:1-21

We humans have a powerful instinct to worship--whether we worship coke bottles or statues or success, we worship what we prize most highly. It demonstrates the amazing power and influence you can have on someone if you can convince them that something or someone is worthy of worship, loyalty and commitment.

We humans find it difficult not to serve false gods. Their force can be so alluring and so appealing. So it's not surprising that when the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob safely leads Moses and the nation of Israel out of Egypt, the first commandment He gives them is that they shall have no other gods.

God knew that while he could get his people out of Egypt, it would be more difficult to get "Egypt" out of his people.

In one of James Michener's novels geologists are digging up the ruins of a civilization from an era long gone. They begin to discover the influence of the gods this ancient people worshiped and how this worship of various gods shaped their identity as a people.

One geologist is heard to say, "You know, if they had a different god, they could have been a different people." We become like the gods we worship. Which is why we must worship the one true God - whose character is holy and righteous.

This morning we start a summer long sermon series that focuses on the Ten Commandments, and today we start at the beginning (a very good place to start). Commandment #1 - "You shall have no other gods before me."

Remember the old Abbott and Costello routine "Who's On First?" The very real and age-old struggle from Adam and Eve to the present time is the question--who has top priority and first claim in our life? "Who's On First?" This issue cries out to be settled.

The answer to this question determines the balance and control of our sacred journey.

John Wooden, former coach of UCLA Bruins, won more NCAA championships than any other basketball coach in history--10 national titles in 12 years. Wanna know the secret to getting his players to ensure top-level performance? Wanna know his secret strategy for success on the court?

He taught his players how to put on their socks. No kidding. Each season Coach Wooden showed his players how to prevent sock-wrinkles around the little toe and the heel, and how to lace up their shoes with a double-knot. Which helped his players avoid blisters.

In the closing minutes of a close game, the player without blisters on his feet will perform better. This simple, basic detail contributed to a series of national championships.

Attention to detail, Wooden says, creates success in basketball, in business and in life. His focus on the fundamentals--running drills and executing plays--gave his team confidence on the court and made them virtually impossible to beat. Wooden never had to resort to pep talks or tirades. He just helped his players excel at the basics; excelling at the basics wins ball games.

When God brought his people out of Egypt, he had to teach them the basics.

God's people had been exposed to so many false ideas and principles in Egypt that God needed to bring them back to the beginning.

Dr. William Barclay reminds us, "The first words of the Bible are "In the beginning God created...," and just as the Bible begins the story of history with God--so it begins the law--with God."

God had established a covenant relationship with Israel beginning with Abraham. The covenant allowed this group of people to have intimacy with God. However, God did not cease to be God--and they did not cease to be human.

In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the lion symbolizes the Divine. Author C. S. Lewis depicts the lion in the book as fun-loving. The children love to hold onto the lion's mane as he runs across the fields. They love to romp and play with him.

But Lewis also depicts the lion as one who growls and roars with a deep tone of voice. There's a time to keep silent before him. There's a time for distance in order to recognize our need for the reverence of God.

I have two mental pictures of Jesus. One portrays Jesus as a kind, gentle person knocking at a door. The other portrays Jesus overturning the tables in the Temple. Both are correct, both are biblical, both depict the ways in which God in Christ views my actions in my journey of faith.

God does not cease to be God and we do not cease being human. Only a God who cannot be molded and shaped by human beings is able to enter human history to mold and transform creation.

Dr. A. W. Tozer, in his book *The Knowledge of The Holy*, says, "Left to ourselves, we tend immediately to reduce God to manageable terms." We want to put God in a place where we can use him or at least know where He is when we need him and that we can control to some degree.

It's ironic, isn't it? The people of Israel had observed how the "gods" of Egypt were powerless against the one true God of Israel. They saw how God, working through Moses, had delivered them out of Egypt. Yet the alluring power of the old gods never died.

Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the great preachers in the 20th century, once preached a sermon titled, "The God Who Made Us and the gods We Make." Dr. Fosdick wrote: "We theologically can believe in the God who made us while all the time psychologically we are controlled and dominated by {the} gods we make."

So again, I ask you, "Who's on first?" When the living God is on second or third, we leave ourselves open to be controlled by something else. As the Israelites leave Egypt, they were ripe to be taken over when the "gods" return in a new, sophisticated disguise.

The greatest problem with "false gods" is that they cause an inner corruption of the spirit. The call of such gods will take us farther than we want to go--cause us to stay longer than we want to stay--and cost us more than we want to pay. They also provide no way out of the bondage they lock us into.

The Ten Commandments give us ten ways to love and experience love from our God--not ten ways that destroy us. That's why Psalm 1 begins with these words: "Blessed is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked... But his delight is in the law of the Lord."

When God is not the No. 1 priority in our life, we make ourselves susceptible to those who wish to shape and mold our lives for their own desires and profit. Israel had just been delivered from such a disastrous situation. The only way they could remain a free people was to follow the God who had set them.

They were headed for the Promise Land, but before they reached it, one principle needed to be clarified: "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before Me."

At a Kansas City Chiefs' baseball game a dog walked onto the playing field and wandered around. The game was stopped so that the dog could be removed. The umpires tried to shoo him off. The players yelled and hollered at him. But the dog became thoroughly confused, running all over the field until it finally laid down on third base, refusing to move.

A sports reporter summed up the situation when he wrote, "The problem was that the dog could hear no dominant voice."

That's what we must hear in our lives above the din of lesser gods which continually beckon--one dominant voice.

Quaker theologian, Elton Trueblood states the 1st commandment in a positive way: "Above all else love God alone."