

**Sermon preached by Mr. Michael Bittenbender  
at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 29, 2015**

**The Ten Commandments (1)  
Exodus 20:2-3  
Deuteronomy 5:6-7**

Good morning!

Please pray with me.

When I heard that the Capitals were going to be playing the Penguins Sunday afternoon in game 2 of their second round series, I was worried I was going to have to keep my sermon brief so everyone could get home to watch it, but then they announced the game is not till 3:00 PM so I guess I have some time. Speaking of hockey, let's dive into this morning's text.

The first text is found in Exodus, chapter 20, starting at verse 2. Let us give our reverent attention to the reading of God's Holy word. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."

The second text is found in Deuteronomy chapter 5 verse 6. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."

May God bless the reading of His Holy word.

Now, some general points to keep in mind as we dig deeper into the first commandment. When reading through the 10 commandments, we see that there are 2 general groupings of them. The first 4 deal with our relationship with God and the next 6 deal with our relationship with others. We will want to keep this in mind as we look into them. Jesus sums up this point in Matthew chapter 22 when He was asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus replies, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first greatest commandment and the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." He then states that the Law and Prophets hang on these two commandments. The overarching view of the commandments should not be as merely a list of do's and don'ts. The 10 commandments, as Robert Morris from Gateway Church in Dallas, Texas says, "enhance our relationship with God and others." This isn't an opportunity to burden or oppress us so much as an opportunity to add depth to our relationship with God.

Another point I want to make about the 10 commandments in general is the context in which they are given. The Israelites had just spent a few hundred years in Egypt. While in Egypt, the circumstances of the Israelites went from being distinguished guests but then deteriorated to being enslaved. Now Egypt is a peculiar place because it is thought that they had 29 main gods, and a couple thousand lesser gods. The practice of polytheism, the worship of many gods, would have been all around the Israelites. Now it is not out of the realm of possibility that once in slavery some Israelites would have forgotten about the God of their father Jacob and may have

believed the Egyptians and their many gods. God, at the outset of these commandments, at the outset of having a relationship with the Israelites, must establish who He is and who is supposed to be in their lives. It has only been around a year since the exodus but God wants it solidified in the history of the Israelites who it is that brought them out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

There is some of the context of the passage. Now let's dive a little bit into this lengthy, dense passage of Scripture. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." Seems simple enough. Don't do it? Why? Because God said so. Amen? Amen!

Easier said than done.

Now the deeper dive. The term "other gods," specifically "gods" in the Hebrew is Elohim which, in addition to being the supreme God that we know, can also mean judges, rulers and angels. A ruler or judge is someone who controls you, who has influence over you, maybe even your affection. In those times, you often lived to serve a ruler over you. When God is speaking to the Israelites, He is asking for total devotion, that no one or no thing should be before Him. We need to take an honest look at ourselves and ask, "What are the things in our lives that are controlling us? What is it in my life that takes my affection, my influence, my time, that captivates what I think about, what I do, how I act?" This is a scary idea, self reflection, but I think if we are honest with ourselves, each one of us can think of something that may be a god in our lives that is before God.

When reading the first commandment, it may seem as though God is saying, look as long as I'm first you can have as many gods as you want. But the word before can be translated a variety of different ways including upon, in, on, over, by, for, both, beyond, through, throughout, against, beside, forth, off, from off. That notion is wrong. This isn't about having many gods as long as God is the first, but there shall not be any other gods.

When God is telling us not to have any other gods, He is inviting us into a relationship with Him, and just Him. We are the ones that determine the depth of that relationship. God lays out the standard for us, He says here is the key to a personal relationship with Me, put Me first, don't put anything else before Me. When viewing the 10 Commandments as a list of do's and don'ts, we relegate our relationship with God based on arbitrary commands rather than on principles that allow depth to our relationship with God. This relationship, as stated before the first commandment, comes from God, who points out that He is the one who brought the Israelites out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. This applies to us as well because God brings us out of slavery, slavery to sin. Each one of us is bound by sin. Romans 6:17 states, "but thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance." God, for us, as well as for the Israelites, has freed us from slavery, and now He shows us how we can turn to Him.

So what is it in our lives that takes our attention, our affections, our influence, our priority over God? It is not as simple as comparing the time we spend doing something, versus the time we spend reading God's word. It's not a calculation of comparing "I spent 3 hours doing this but

spent 4 hours reading my Bible.” When we start nitpicking our time, justifying indulging our “god” we are missing the point.

This is not just about actions. If there is something, (a god), in front of God, it does us no good to remove that god and replace it with another. Hockey, technology and money are gods that I have identified in my life. If I identify hockey as a god in my life, it does me no good to say “ok, I’m not watching any hockey games until I spend more time reading my Bible/praying/worshipping than watching hockey,” and then use the time I would be watching hockey with playing stupid video games on my phone. I’ve just replaced one god in my life for another. Putting God first is having a relationship with him. And please don’t hear me saying that the spiritual disciplines are bad. Heather Flies, a middle school youth worker who speaks at Planet Wisdom, a student discipleship conference we attend illustrated it this way. A man is training dogs for dogfighting and during one of the training sessions a man asks him, “Do you know which one is going to win?” He smiled and said, “Of course, the one I feed more is going to win.” The same is true about our Spirit and Body. When we put God first in our lives our Spirit is going to win. We feed our spirit when we are reading and praying and worshipping. Feeding our body is indulging that other god in our life. This isn’t about legalism. We won’t be able to stand on the day of judgement and recount minute by minute or action by action what we have done if the Creator of the universe doesn’t know us. How does He know us? By having a personal relationship with Him, by submitting our lives to Him and putting our trust in Him. Trusting that, ok God, there is a lot the world has to offer it seems (falsely), but I’m going to trust that if I trust You that You will make my path straight as it says in Proverbs 3:5-6.

See, we can have a great understanding of God, our actions can be well intended, our doctrine of Him can be sound, but if we don’t have a relationship with Him, it is all meaningless. (church in Ephesus Revelation 2:4). It talks about how they have abandoned their first love. Their first love being God and others (Ephesians 1:15). The second generation leaders kept “busy”, busy doing things to benefit the members and the community, but they were acting out of wrong motives. Work for God must be motivated by love for God or it will not last. There is a relationship that starts with God’s sacrificial love for us, and our response of turning to Him and responding to that love, with total devotion. God wants to take care of us, He wants to nurture us, right here through these commandments, and He knows that no one or nothing can take care of you better than He can. He wants to be your God, before anything else and He wants to take care of you.

I love the story I heard about an 8 year old boy who sat in class, taking a test. He became so nervous and distraught about completing the test on time that he wet his pants. Horrors! He looked down and saw a little puddle there beneath him. Sick with worry and embarrassment, he looked up just in time to see his teacher motioning him to her desk. But how could he move? What would he do? Noticing that the boy seemed frozen in his chair, the teacher got up from her desk and began walking down the aisle toward him. *Oh no!* he groaned to himself. *What in the world am I going to do now? She’s going to see this puddle and everybody will laugh. It’s going to be horrible.*

What he didn’t know was at that very moment one of his classmates, a little girl, was coming down the aisle from behind him carrying a large fishbowl. When she got up alongside him, she suddenly lurched and dropped the heavy bowl. It shattered with a loud crash and sent water, broken glass,

and displaced fish everywhere. Now covered by fish-tank water, the boy sat there thinking, *Thank God! Thank God! There IS a God in heaven! What a wonderful gift, what a wonderful girl!*

But then it dawned on him that little boys don't even like little girls. He couldn't possibly let the incident pass. He looked at her and said, "What's wrong with you, you clumsy clod? Can't you watch where you're going?" As the class laughed at the girl, the teacher took the boy (now covered by dignity) to the gym class to get him some dry clothes to wear.

At lunchtime, no one wanted to sit with the girl. Her friends avoided her at recess. In the unforgiving society of elementary school, she was suddenly a plague and a pariah.

When the day was over and the boy was on his way home, he walked out the door and saw her. All the kids were leaving, but she was walking by herself along the fence. He began to reflect on what had happened that day and suddenly, on an impulse, walked over to her

"You know," he said, "I've been thinking about what happened today. That wasn't an accident, was it? You did that on purpose, didn't you?"

"Yes," she said, "I did it on purpose. I knew what had...happened to you. You see, I wet my pants once, too."

I heard this story and thought, "Lord, I don't want to ever forget what you have done for me. I, too, have wet my pants. But you covered me. You spilled your precious blood for me and covered my sins. You took all my shame upon Yourself. Now I'm clean. You have fit me for heaven even though I deserved hell. You saw my hopeless situation and rescued me. You have given me dignity and hope and a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Why should I ever want to put anything in front of You?"

The Creator of the universe, has sacrificed His Son, telling Him that He loves us so much that He would have Him suffer greatly, for sinners like you and me, wants to take care of us, wants to be our God, He brings us out of slavery to sin, that we might find Him. So respond in the only way that makes sense, with total devotion. What is it keeping us from keeping God first, from setting him apart? My prayer is that we reflect on that daily, identify it daily, turn from it, and turn to a God who loves us and has shown us principles for deepening our relationship with Him.