

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, September 16, 1990, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

EXODUS 20:1-3

“And God spoke all these words, ‘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.’”

TEN STEPS TO THE GOOD LIFE **(1) HOW TO SET YOUR PRIORITIES**

Just as a new car comes equipped with an “owner’s manual,” explaining how to get maximum performance with the minimum of wear and tear, so God has given us the Ten Commandments as instructions for life as it’s meant to be lived.

What are the Ten Commandments? Well, generally, they are a standard for society. You know that our whole system of jurisprudence is based on the Ten Commandments. It’s interesting to note that whether you’re a Christian, a Jew, or a Muslim, all of these three major religions accept the Commandments.

But personally, they are a blueprint for happiness. The Commandments are about relationships -- our relationship to God, to other people, and to things. In fact, the first four Commandments have to do with our relationship to God; and the last six are about our relationship to other people.

So, I’m calling this series -- Ten Steps to the Good Life, because God meant them for our own good.

Now why did God give us the Ten Commandments? He gave them to us because He loves us, because He wants the best for us. But you say, “They’re so negative!” But God didn’t give them to make you miserable. He didn’t say to Himself, “Now what can I think of that would really make life a bummer? -- and I’ll put that down -- don’t do that!” You know, every one of the Commandments could be stated as a Beatitude — blessed are those who do not lie or steal or kill. “Happy are those who stay away from those things.” Indeed, every one of them is stated positively in the New Testament. You see, when God gives a negative, it always has a positive purpose.

When we used to say to our children, “Don’t put your hand on the hot stove,” was that for our benefit or their benefit? It was for theirs. Was it to help or to hurt? It was to help. When we said to them, “Don’t run out in the street,” was that to punish them or to protect them? To protect them. And the Bible teaches that God has set up our world with certain laws.

There are physical laws, like the law of gravity. Now when we ignore or disobey God’s laws we only hurt ourselves. It’s like the fellow who jumps out a window on the 110th floor of a

skyscraper, saying, “I don’t believe in the law of gravity.” And halfway down someone looks out a window and says, “How’s it going?” And he says, “So far so good.” But he’s going to hit the ground, and they’re going to scrape up the pieces. You see, when we break God’s laws, they break us.

And there are spiritual laws also, and God says, “You are to obey these things.” They are not the Ten Suggestions. They’re not optional. And today we are going to look at the first of these -- the first step to the good life --Exodus 20:1-3. God says, “I am the Lord your God, Who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” You see, just three months earlier Moses had led the children of Israel out of Egypt, and now God is going to give them new values for a new nation. And in verse 3 God says -

“You shall have no other gods before Me.”

Now the order of the Commandments is not haphazard. God gave the first Commandment first because it’s the most important one of all.

1. What is the Principle? “You shall have no other gods before Me.” The principle is this — God gets first place in my life. He’s not going to play second fiddle to anyone or anything. He deserves top priority. He doesn’t want nor will He tolerate any competition. He will brook no rival.

How do you define a “god”? What is a “god”? A “god” is anything that has first place in your life. For some people, their god is their home, or their boat, or their job, their career, their reputation or anything else that takes first place in their life. That becomes their god. You notice here that God didn’t say, “You shall believe in a god.” Why didn’t He say that? Because it’s unnecessary. Everybody believes in some kind of god. Practically speaking there’s no such thing as an atheist. Everybody has a god; it’s just who or what that God is. It may be their spouse. It may be themselves. Look at those two words, “before Me” -- “You shall have no other gods before Me.” I could sum up our whole sermon today in one word -- priorities. God says, “I want top priority -- nobody before Me.” Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters.” He didn’t say, “You shouldn’t serve two masters,” but rather, “You cannot serve two masters.” Why? Because you’re going to have unbearable tension and anxiety if you do. The fact is, you and I are going to serve someone in life.

So, what is the key to freedom? The key to freedom is to serve the best master. Let God be God in your life. Choose a Master Who is going to bless you as no one else can. Someone says, “I take drugs.” No. They take you. We’re going to be controlled by something or someone in life, so choose the One Who has your best interests at heart.

So, the principle is that God gets first place in my life.

2. What is the Promise? Look at Matthew 6:33 -- “Seek first God’s kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Folks, when you have an insurance policy that covers you 100%, that’s good news. This verse says, when you seek first God’s kingdom, everything in your life will be taken care of by God. Isn’t that something!

Now when Jesus spoke these words, do you know what He had been talking about? He had been talking about worry. You see, one of the ways you can know that God holds first place in your life is to ask yourself the question, “Do I worry?” If you’re worrying, it means that something else is taking first priority in your life. But God says, “Don’t worry; instead seek first My kingdom and all these other things will be given to you as well. I’ll take total care of you!” He offers total coverage!

Another great verse is Proverbs 3:6 (Living Bible) - “In everything you do, put God first, and He will direct you, and crown your efforts with success.”

The principle — God gets first place in my life.

The promise — if I put Him first in my life, He’ll bring everything else into focus.

3. What is the Procedure? How do I make God the number one priority in my life? Well, let me give you five areas in which God wants to hold first place in your life. I will put them in the form of an acrostic -- F-I-R-S-T first --

a. God wants to have first place in your life in your FINANCES. Look at Proverbs 3:9,10 -- “Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.” That’s a promise.

In Corinthians 16:2 Paul says, “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income...” God wants to be first in your finances, because how you spend your money reveals what is really important to you. Do you want to know what your priorities are? Check your check book!

Look at Deuteronomy 14:23 (Living Bible) — “The purpose of tithing is to teach you always to put God first in your lives.” Why does God want us to return at least 10% to Him? Because God wants what your money represents. He wants you. God doesn’t need your money. Tithing is just a reminder that God wants first place in your life. And if God is first in your finances, most likely He will be first in your whole life because money represents our lives.

Put Him first in your finances.

b. Put God first in your INTERESTS. I think that includes your career, your home, your hobbies, your recreation. You know, you can tell a lot about a person’s priorities by what he gets excited about! Have you noticed. that?

Do you know something — you can go to a Redskins game and stand and wave your arms and shout with glee or groan with dismay, and they call you a fan. But if you come to church and get the least bit excited, or even give expression to a hearty “Amen!” they call you a fanatic! You’re a fan if you’re excited about sport; you’re a fanatic if you’re excited about Christ and faith and salvation.

What holds first place in your interests? What do you like to think about the most? What do you like to read about the most? What do you like to talk about the most? That's your god!

Some people can get on the phone and they can chitchat for hours, and they can talk about all sorts of things. But they can't talk for three minutes about the Lord Jesus! And what's the priority in their lives?

Two ladies were talking on the phone one day, and the one said to the other, "Did you see Kathy's new suit on Sunday?" "No, I didn't." "Did you see Helen's new dress?" "No." "Well, did you see Madge's new hat?" "No." "Well surely you saw Connie's new coat." "No." She said, "A lot of good it does you to go to church!"

What are you most interested in? -- that's your god! And God says, "I don't want any gods before Me" — no rivals, no competition; I want to be first in your finances, and first in your interests.

Look at 1 Corinthians 10:31, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." Paul is saying, "You can sit down to a meal and say, 'Lord, I'm doing this to glorify You.'" And how do you do that? You do it with gratitude for what He has placed on your plate! Don't be ashamed to bow your head and say "Grace" even in a crowded restaurant. Any time you approach anything and say, "Lord, I'm grateful for this; if it weren't for You I wouldn't have anything" -- you're glorifying God. Put Him first in your interests.

c. Put God first in your RELATIONSHIPS. Folks, if God Is going to be first in your life, then you're going to have to choose your friends carefully. Proverbs 12:26 says, "A righteous man is cautious in friendship." And Proverbs 27:19 (Good News Bible) says, "What a man is really like is shown by the kind, of friends he chooses."

How many of you would agree that some relationships are just dead wrong? Perhaps you're in a business relationship, a business partnership with an unbeliever, and you're "unequally yoked"; and you know it's wrong, and God isn't blessing you. It's like Samson playing with fire. "How close to the flames can I get without getting burned? How close to the edge of the cliff can I venture without slipping over?" And maybe you're involved in a relationship that you know is wrong for you. The Bible says that "Bad company corrupts good character" (1 Corinthians 15:33). You have to put God first in your relationships. I think that includes your home. Look at what Joshua said, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15).

You can't say a better thing than this: "Our house will serve the Lord." Jesus Christ will be Number One in our life and in our home. There is the key to a strong marriage. It's like the spokes of a wheel; as they come closer to the center, they come closer to each other. So, if as husband and wife you are both putting Christ first, as you both grow toward the Lord, it draws you closer together naturally. So, there will be decreasing tension and anxiety and conflict.

It's a great thing to have the kind of relationship where you can talk quite naturally to your

friends about the Lord. Put Him first in your finances, in your Interests, in your relationships - and

d. Put God first in your SCHEDULE. I came across a verse recently that I've decided is the life verse for the majority of people living in Metropolitan Washington. It is Exodus 18:13, "He was kept busy from morning to night"! How many of you can relate to that verse? We can become so busy that we forget God. A wise old Christian once said, "Beware of the barrenness of a busy life!" You can get so caught up in activities, good activities -- ball games and budgets and buildings and career, taxes and sports, ballet classes, and home schooling the kids -- and all these things crowd into your life and demand your attention.

Jeremiah 2:32 says, "My people have forgotten Me for days on end." It's so easy to forget or neglect God amid the throng of duties and pleasures.

But someone says, "Pastor, don't come down on me so hard. I'm in church every Sunday week after week." And I think that's great! But suppose you husbands said to your wives today, after church, "Honey, I promise that from this day forward, I will be faithful to you one day a week! Every Sunday I'll be faithful to you." You see, partial faithfulness is no faithfulness at all.

What God is saying to you and to me is this: "I want to be included in, and I want to be a part of your daily schedule." Now how do you do that in a practical way? We're so busy, we have so many things going on, we have so many irons in the fire that we put out the fire. How are you going to put God first in your schedule?

The solution is to make appointments with God. You can even pencil it in your diary! Make appointments with Hint just as you do with anyone else. Regard it as a date and remember that dates hate to be stood up! And you establish the regular habit of time alone with God every day.

Look at Psalm 55:17 (Living Bible) - "I will pray morning, noon and night... and He will hear and answer me." David said, "I'm going to set my watch for 7 a.m., 12 noon and 10 p.m. to meet with God." You can say, "Instead of a coffee break, I'm going to have a prayer break. In the middle of all my work, I'm going to stop and tune in to God -- a minute, or two minutes, or whatever, and just focus in on Him. And I'm going to make these appointments, and I'm not going to break them." Martin Luther took one minute as a prayer break every time the clock chimed the hour.

Mark 1:35 says, "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up... and went off to a solitary place, where He prayed." If our Lord needed to do this, do you think you and I need to do it? Just say, "I need some time out, I need some quiet time to get down to prayer and Bible study. I need spiritual renewal, not just on Sunday." How would it be if you said, "I'm going to fast Monday through Saturday, and then on Sunday I'll stuff myself!"? Your system couldn't take it! Don't leave yourself open to spiritual indigestion. Take your spiritual food every day.

So God says, "Schedule Me into your life. Establish the habit of regular prayer and

reflection and Bible study.”

e. Put God first in your TROUBLES. God says, “I want to be first in your troubles.” What am I talking about? I’m talking about the problems and the pressures and the crises that you’re going to go through in the days ahead -- maybe some of you are going through a crisis right now. You don’t know what they are, and neither do I, but you will have some crises in your life. It’s inevitable. But put God first in your troubles. What am I saying? I’m saying -- Whom do you turn to first when your life caves in? When you’re being pulled apart in fifteen different ways, whom do you turn to first?

I’m amazed at how many Christians see God as a last resort -- “Well, I guess all we can do now is pray!” And the husband says, “Has it come to that? It’s really gotten bad. if you have to pray about it!” Folks, God ought to be our first option! What does it mean -- “You shall have no other gods before Me”? It means putting Him first in every area of your life, including the hassles and the heartbreaks of life. When life hits you like a tidal wave, the first thing you should do is say, “Lord, what do You think about this situation? How do You see it from Your point of view? What are You trying to tell me? What are You trying to teach me, Lord?”

Some people are embarrassed, and they don’t want to bother God, because they haven’t been talking to Him in good times, and so they feel bad about talking to Him when they have a real need. And that, of course, is just your own problem, because God is always waiting to help you. Listen to Psalm 50:15, “Call upon Me in your day of trouble and I will deliver you...” Another psalm says that God is an ever-present help in time of trouble (46:1). He’s always there. Another verse says, “He is my Refuge and my Fortress in times of trouble” (Psalm 91:1). When you’re getting knocked around at work, go into your office, shut the door, take a prayer break; call on the Lord. Say, “God, help me out, I just got browbeaten by the boss.” Or, “I just have too many things to get done, too many deadlines to meet, and there’s no way I can get it all done.” Call upon Him in your time of trouble. God wants you to turn to Him first.

I just don’t know how people face crises without the Lord. Some of you have been through some major struggles, and we’ve been through some together, and the reason you made it through is because you had the Lord. How do people make it without Him? Well, frankly, many of them don’t. They fall apart, and they’re scarred for life, and they carry resentments to their grave; and they don’t make it through.

Now these are five practical areas in which you can put Christ first in your life -- in your finances, your interests, your relationships, your schedule, and your troubles.

What holds first place in your life? Who is going to be your God? The first step to the good life is this -- make God Number One in your life. It means an all-out commitment to God’s dear Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Look at Colossians 1:18 (Good News Bible) - “Christ was raised from death in order that He alone might have first place in all things.” “He alone” -- not Christ plus my job, or Christ plus my family, or Christ plus my recreation -- but He alone wants first place.

How do you know when He has first place? - when the worries start to drain out of your

life!

AMEN.