

Putting God First

Exodus 20:1-17

¹Then God spoke all these words:

²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation[£] of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³You shall not murder.[£]

¹⁴You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵You shall not steal.

¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Matthew 22:34-39

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

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In recent weeks, we have been talking about how God is a great giver who gives life and purpose and power. We noted that receiving God's gifts requires that we take the posture of a receiver: opening our hands to receive what God would give us.

The blessings of such a giving God are felt powerfully over the summer.

For some it is at summer camp where teens discover how much God loves them and accepts them as they are. The more we know our own shortcomings, the more powerful God's love becomes for us.

Others realize God's blessing in the beauty of nature: the peaceful sounds of water at the shore, the growth of plants, the beauty of a full moon.

Still others know that when they've gotten to the end of their rope, God has been there all along as their refuge and strength.¹

We learn about God's generosity in words, but it is often in experiences of the summer that it is written on our hearts: God is great and God is good.

How does a person stay connected to God with such a giving God?

When we're moved by the passion of faith, the impulse of our lives is to turn to God and to stay close with God. But every Christian has likely experienced that passion, even passion for God, can fade.

Jesus warned in a parable about the weeds choking out the tender sprout. He explained that the concerns of this world can choke out the growth of faith that God has planted within us.²

How *does* a person stay connected with God?

That's the focus of our Scriptures today.

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God had heard the cries of the Hebrew people who had become slaves in a foreign land. God sent Moses who with displays of power cracked the Pharaoh's hardened heart. After the excitement of freedom had worn off, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments and the first one can be summarized as simply – keep me first.

The commandment may seem to some as self-serving on God's part...until we realize that God is not self-serving. God heard the cries of the people, God called Moses, worked acts of power through him, softened Pharaoh's heart, guided the people into freedom, fed them, and gave them the promise that God would give them a place to be God's people.

To say that God is first and God calls us to put God first in our lives is nothing more than saying "orient your lives to life as it is: I am your creator you are my people".

¹ Psalm 46

² Mark 4:7, 19

In time, we realize that this commandment is very practical. In time, God's people faced many distractions in their new homeland. No matter where you are, weeds seem to thrive and threaten to cut us off from God. The command to put God first is, spiritually speaking, weed control.

Finally, as the source of our life, God is saying I am the vine, you are the branches, it is by staying connected with me that your life bears fruit.³

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Putting God first in our lives sounds so simple. It is similar to daily exercise. We all believe that we should be active each day, but how many of us exercised yesterday?

Jesus said that putting God first was the most important commandment of all – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”⁴

How do we do it?

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Archbishop Desmond Tutu lived in South Africa under the oppressive system of institutional racial division.⁵ “Under apartheid, people were legally classified into a racial group - the main ones being White, Black, Indian and Coloured - and were geographically, and forcibly, separated from each other on the basis of the legal classification.”⁶

Tutu was an advocate for the end apartheid but also for the reconciliation of all the parties. Tutu is credited with creating the metaphor “rainbow nation” to describe South African life after racial segregation.

In his prayer book, Archbishop Tutu quotes this prayer written by Charles De Foucauld

“My Father, I abandon myself to you. Do with me as you will. Whatever you may do with me, I thank you. Provided your will is fulfilled in me and in all creatures I ask for nothing more, my God. I place my soul in your hands. I give it to you, my God with all the love of my heart because I love you. And for me it is a necessity of love, this gift of myself, this placing of myself in your hands without reserve in boundless confidence because you are my Father.”⁷

Putting God first begins in love for God as our loving heavenly Father.

As Jesus taught in the parable of the Prodigal Son, God is like the father who ran with arms flung open to welcome the return of his rebellious son.

³ John 15:5

⁴ Matthew 22:37

⁵ The information on Bishop Tutu cited in this sermon can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desmond_Tutu

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apartheid>

⁷ Desmond Tutu, *An African Prayer Book*, Image/Doubleday Books, New York, 1995, p. 103-104

In a similar way, we see the self-less love of Jesus who gave his life for us and we see the wisdom of Jesus who understands the hearts of men and women, knows the challenges of this life, and is himself the way to abundant life.

It is only when we get beyond our fears of God as policeman or God as tyrannical judge that we find that we are drawn to the beauty of God.

Still, we must be on guard against the growth of the weeds. In those seasons when we are not inspired by God's beauty or love or wisdom, it is our faith commitments that keep us connected with God.

Good intentions fade. Habits stick.

Jesus was a person of spiritual habit. Scripture says of Jesus "...he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom."⁸

The Letter to the Hebrews counsels believers to not neglect to meet together in the community of faith.⁹

Tim Stafford writes that church attendance used to be mandatory and absence from worship could cause something of a scandal.¹⁰

Today, church attendance has regained real meaning. In Stafford's words, "When you show up at church you make a real statement: God matters."¹¹

The problem is that life is busy, time is precious, and Sunday is often the time we have to catch up with ourselves.

Even so, the question remains: what is God's place among your priorities?

Often time, our worship, study, fellowship can be most productive when it costs us something. Often it is then that we hear the unexpected word to protect us, or guide us or encourage us.

Lest we think that this is all about habit and nothing about harvest, I want you to know that your staff has been working hard to be fruitful channels of God's blessing for you:

Wonderful musical opportunities to speak God's word and inspire you in song.

Timely speakers to inform us and challenge us in education.

⁸ Luke 4:16

⁹ Hebrews 10:25

¹⁰ Tim Stafford, Never Mind the Jones, IVP Books, Downers Grove, Illinois, 2004, p. 39

¹¹ IBID

Opportunities for digging into God's word, asking hard questions in various Bible studies.

Children will experience something of a village in Jesus' day. Other teachers of children and youth have been planning ways of sharing the treasures of faith with the children.

In the hallway outside the church nursery you will see great pictures of the youth exploring inner beauty, fishing, and hanging out together.

Putting God first through your participation in your church promises to bless you.

How else can you keep God first?

Each person and each family chooses what is right, but here are a few suggestions:

Saying grace wherever you are is an observance that God is first in your life. Rather than take God's blessings for granted or assume that we are the source of them, we put God first by offering our thanks.

Your gift to your church is another way that God may be first or last on your list of priorities. What does your giving say about God's place in your finances?

Community service is not just giving back to your community, for the Christian we work as partners with God to accomplish God's good will for our neighbors.

Just so you see how creative we can be with putting God first, we can use our pain redemptively. First, we can trust that God is at work in the midst of our pain and that God's good will will be done through it.

When we might simply try to get beyond the discomfort, we can redeem it by using it for good.

Within our community of faith, people humbly share their survivor story with others as an encouragement to them. Recently at a funeral for an adult child, I looked into the congregation, and saw someone in the congregation who had also experienced a child's death.

Beyond these examples of putting God first are the creative possibilities of your life.

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A friend once said of her husband, he'd rather miss breakfast than miss his morning time with God.

Such an attitude is not the result of some life transforming experience that provides perpetual inspiration. It comes from knowing that "running to meet us" and the "wide-armed welcome" that God has for all God's children. And it comes from knowing that, left unchecked, the delightful life with God can be choked to death by the concerns of this life.

Someone said, “Those who put God first – truly first...will find [God] profoundly satisfying. They will find life flowing into them. The experience will draw them back to God, again and again.”¹²

I invite you today, right now, to remember God’s great love for you that planted within you the seed of faith.

And, with Scripture, I challenge you to fight the weeds. Keep God first in your life through weekly participation in your church and through the generous use of your gifts.

I invite you to make such a prayer of commitment to God. I’ll begin, but then, in silence, you put it into your own words.

Let us pray: God the Giver, we thank you for the love that you have shown to us not only in the gift of our lives, but also in your forgiveness, acceptance, and your call for us to work with you in the world.

We understand how the weeds of this world can choke the life out of faith, and so we commit ourselves to putting you first in our life. By staying connected with you, we trust that you will bear much fruit in our lives.

Hear now our personal commitment to you.

Hear our prayer, loving God.

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¹² Stafford, p. 33