

Series: Ten Keys to the Joyful Life
#1: First Things First
Exodus 20:2-3 and Mark 12:29-31 (NIV)
Pastor John Gill

I want you to listen carefully to this statement, and see if you agree: “The Ten Commandments are the primary utterances and most basic commands of God, the guiding principles for how we should relate to God and to others, and the foundation on which a civilized society should be built.”

How many of you would agree with that statement? OK: Now which of you would like to stand and, without looking, recite the 10 Commandments? Few of us could do that, even if our life depended on it!

As I mentioned last week in my message, there has been a controversy in America in recent years over the 10 Commandments. The courts have been trying to determine if and when it is appropriate to display the 10 Commandments in or around public buildings. The Supreme Court has attempted to clarify the matter by ruling that sometimes the Commandments are legal, and under other circumstances they are not.

Many religious folks were outraged! “Why can’t the 10 Commandments be posted?” they asked. “Why - America was BUILT on the 10 Commandments,” they argue. “What will happen to the moral fabric of our country if we have to take them off the walls of our court houses and schools?”

Strong points! - and for the most part, I agree with them. However, most of those folks who are SO outraged and vocal about this attack on the 10 Commandments probably couldn’t even BEGIN to recite them. They’d likely have been better off trying to name the Seven Dwarfs!

If the truth be known, we all would agree with the CONCEPT of the “10 Commandments” – we like them “in theory.” But actually, very few of us have ever really stopped to study them, much less memorize them. Yet, we as Christians claim to base our whole society, our lives, and our behavior on them! Strange that we would know so little about them.

That’s why we will be spending the next 10 weeks looking at the 10 Commandments one-by-one, unlocking these “Ten Keys to the Joyful Life” which God has given us. So, let’s begin.

“What is the first commandment?” Some children who were in a Sunday School class in England were asked that question, and one smart little kid piped up: “The first commandment was when Eve told Adam to eat the apple!” And of course, that little boy was right, in a way. But, of the listing of the commandments we find in the 20th chapter of Exodus, the first one actually is, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”

I don't know about you, but when I hear that first commandment, my initial impulse is to want to just skip over it . . . you know – so we can get to the real “meat and potatoes” of the Commandments . . . those you can sink your teeth into – prohibitions against killing, adultery, stealing and covetousness. Why even waste our time talking about this first Commandment – “Thou shalt have no other gods before me?”

It's a given, isn't it? - a no-brainer. We're all Christians here (at least I'm assuming most of us are)! By definition, doesn't that mean that we believe that God is God? – It's that simple. Why even spend time discussing it?

Well, when we look more closely we will find that this commandment is not QUITE as “simple” and self-evident as it may first appear. Far from being a simple little commandment that is easy to obey; the truth is that it is a challenging commandment of God that is extremely difficult to obey.

It's not by accident that God places it as #1 because it is the lynch-pin for all the others. Not only is it numerically first in the list, it is also first in importance. Unless we understand and obey this first commandment, none of the other nine will make any sense to us.

So, what makes this commandment so important? And if it really IS the key to understanding all the other nine, why is it that we tend to overlook it so easily? I believe it's because we THINK we know what the First Commandment says, when in reality, we haven't taken the time to look at what it actually says.

If I were to ask you to summarize this commandment, you would probably say, “It says that there is only one God,” and, of course, that is a true statement.

But that is NOT what the commandment actually says. It literally says, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” You see, this first commandment does NOT say that there ARE no other gods. In fact, it seems to assume that there are. It simply demands that we not place any OTHER gods before HIM.

So, right here at the beginning of the Ten Commandments, we have an acknowledgement by God himself that there are other competing “gods” in the world vying for our loyalty and devotion. He is NOT the only God!

Does that strike anyone as strange? It strikes ME as strange – it sounds a little like polytheism. But isn't that heresy? Doesn't it run contrary to the statement Jesus quotes in our scripture lesson this morning: “Here O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” But, right here we have – - straight from the mouth of God himself – an acknowledgment that there are indeed “other gods” out there!

What are we supposed to make of this first commandment? I think that, in order to understand this commandment, we need to look at it in the context of the ancient world which

is its setting. The ancient world was a world filled with many competing gods. Every nation (even every city) had its own patron god . . . And then, of course, there were gods of nature to help the crops . . . there were gods of war to fight their battles . . . there were gods of fertility to ensure healthy babies . . . and the list goes on and on.

No one in the ancient world questioned that there were many competing gods. Not even the Hebrews during this period questioned the existence of other gods. After all, they had just been liberated from slavery in Egypt . . . how? Because of THEIR national God, “Yahweh” (or Jehovah, in English), had defeated the many pagan gods of Egypt. That was what all those strange plagues were all about. With each plague (the bloody Nile, frogs, locusts, and so forth) Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, was discrediting and defeating the gods of Egypt – deities that were associated with the Nile, frogs, locusts, etc.

And throughout the long history of the Jews we find recorded in our Old Testament, they were always tempted to worship those other gods, often side by side with Yahweh. And whenever they did, disaster would follow.

Even in the time of Christ and the Early Church, God’s people were constantly confronting “other gods” – that pantheon of Greco-Roman gods whose temples and shrines dotted the landscape of the Roman Empire.

We shouldn’t be surprised that the first commandment says, “Thou shalt have no OTHER gods before me,” because God knew that His people would be tempted by all those OTHER gods.

But that doesn’t mean that God is implying that all those other gods are real and living gods . . . far from it! They are the creations of the imaginations of human beings. God is saying that, even though they may not be real, they are still a threat – they can still have power over people, because people will place their trust and faith in THEM, rather than placing their trust and faith in HIM.

So, in its historical context, this commandment was intended to be a word of warning to those Hebrew slaves who had just been liberated from the Egyptians, not to be enticed to follow the pagan gods they would find when they entered Canaan, their the Promised Land.

This commandment made perfect sense in its historical context.

“Well, preacher,” you might be thinking, “that may explain what this commandment meant to the Hebrews thousands of years ago, but how can it have any meaning for us. We don’t worship idols of other gods. We believe in the one-and-only true God. That’s why we’re sitting here this morning in church! This commandment was meant for those ancient peoples with their pagan god’s. It doesn’t really speak to us today.”

Or does it? In fact, our world today is amazingly similar to the ancient world to which the commandments were given. Today, we have more in common with the pagan world in which the Biblical drama was played out than at any other time in our history.

In 21st century America, there are many competing “gods” out there. While I think that welcoming immigrants is basic to who we are as a nation – we want to welcome and integrate immigrants into our country –

the reality is that immigrants coming to American shores today are bringing with them a whole smorgasbord of other gods and religions, seeking to convert our neighbors and our children, and demanding recognition. In addition, psychics, spiritualism, and witchcraft are on the rise; New Age and secular humanistic philosophies have now permeated popular culture through TV, movies, magazines, and social media so completely that we can hardly recognize their subtle influence on our thinking and beliefs. Even Christians are being tempted to flirt with non-Christian beliefs and practices. Yes, those “other gods” are still around.

And what makes it even more alarming is that our American society and government are encouraging the denial of the first commandment. To a large extent, we are no longer living in a Christian country (or even a Judeo-Christian one). America is essentially now a “pagan” nation, or at least one that embraces un-biblical beliefs. No longer does our society recognize that there is only one true God, but that the God of the Jews and Christians is only one of many competing gods, and that each “god” must be, not only tolerated, but recognized as being equally real and valid. There is no ultimate truth or moral code any more. It’s no wonder America wants to abolish the 10 Commandments; we are in total violation of the very first one!

But it doesn’t stop there. It’s easy for us to look at our country and lament what is happening – how we as a nation are allowing other gods to be placed before the one true God. The problem isn’t just America’s problem. You and I, in our personal lives, struggle with this first commandment, too. That’s because unconsciously we are guilty of worshiping other gods, as well.

Perhaps we don’t dabble in the occult, engage in eastern mysticism, call the Psychic Hotline, or use a Ouija board to help us make decisions, but we still are guilty of breaking this first commandment. That’s because this commandment is all about priorities. What is the ultimate priority of our lives? It will either be the one true God, or it will be a false god.

Friends, don’t be fooled. Each of us has an altar in our heart, and someone or something is going to reign there. It’s not a question of whether we worship a god, but what god we worship. And people will worship just about anything!

You don’t believe me? Consider this: In the April 25, 1994, news section of Christianity Today, it was reported that some fans of Elvis Presley were actually revering the King of Rock and Roll as a god. Pockets of semi-organized Elvis worshipers had taken hold in New York, Colorado, and Indiana. Worshipers raised their hands, spelled and then chanted Presley’s name, worked

themselves into a fervor, and prayed to the deceased star. Followers believe that Elvis watches over them. They have been called “Presleyite Disciples” or “Elivites.”

If someone reports seeing Presley, the high priest at “The Church of the Risen Elvis” in Denver would hold an Elvis worship service. They would enshrine a look-alike doll of Elvis on an altar, surrounded by candles and flowers. They worshipped him as their god. Apparently, there is also a church called “The First Presleyterian Church of Elvis the Divine.”

Perhaps you and I aren’t so far-out that we would put Elvis on the altar of our hearts, but we’ll put just about anything else there! Whether its Elvis, or Satan, or drugs, or sex, or money, or power, or political party, or status, or physical beauty . . . or even something good and noble, like your marriage, or family, or career, or hobbies . . . ***Something*** is going to take first place in your life, and reign on the altar of your heart. And whatever it is that has first place in your life – ***that*** is the “god” that you worship and serve.

Friends, it is VITAL that we hear and heed this first commandment! Instead of being a no-brainer to be skipped over, this commandment is the most important of them all!

God couldn’t have made it any clearer: If we are to discover joy and fulfillment, HE must have first place in our lives, and must reign uncontested in our hearts. Our God is a jealous God. He refuses to take second place, nor will He put up with competition from any “other gods” that may try to make a claim on our life.

The bottom line is this: If we are to know the joy-filled life, we must give our hearts TOTALLY to God – nothing less will do.

My friends, I’d like for you to close your eyes for a moment. Look on the altar of your heart . . . Does God reign there supreme and uncontested? Is He the priority of your life? Or are there “other gods” you are bowing down to? (silence)

This morning, we are going to close this message with a time of quiet prayer. As you reflect on the first commandment, ask yourself: “Is there anything other than God on the “altar of my heart” ... something that might be keeping me from giving my total devotion to Him?”

And once you’ve identified that “other God,” picture yourself physically removing it from the altar of your heart. And then invite the One True God to take His proper place in your life.

(a period of silence and prayer)

“Into my heart, Into my heart, Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.
Come in today. Come in to stay. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.”

My friend, if you have truly put God first, then you will have discovered “the first key to the joyful life.”

