

THE PRIORITY GOD DEMANDS IN OUR HEARTS - Exodus 20:1-3 - "And God spoke all these words, saying, [2] 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. [3] You shall have no other gods before me.'"

In any life there can only be *one dominating priority*. All of this is the theme of our text today. This commandment is first because it alone *defines* what true religious commitment is all about. The commandment begins, *not with the command to believe in God*. The command is really *worship*, but not the way we *usually* think about our worship. It's not so much about *passion* in worship as it is about *loyalty* in worship. This command is a reminder that nothing is genuine or obedient with God until it's *exclusive*.

This commandment is the *costly* commandment. This commandment will never be settled *by accident*. False Gods come out of the heart like the bleeding roots of a pulled tooth. It takes constant care and purity of heart to keep this command. Jesus Himself re-emphasized its pivotal importance to New Testament discipleship: Mark 12:28-31 - "And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" [29] Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. [30] And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' [31] The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

1) TO LOVE GOD EXCLUSIVELY IS TO LOVE HIM BY CHOICE - Many of us grew up into the Christian life with very little choice of doing anything else. We were *taken* to church or Sunday School. We were *ushered into* family devotions with our parents. Many of us had the blessing of being sheltered from *other corrupting influences* that were very real options for those less blessed. All of those things are a precious heritage for those who grew up with them. But *none* of them demonstrates a committed choice to make God your God.

Then there comes a time, later on in life, when you are confronted with genuine options to *choose something other than God*. Perhaps at university or college - perhaps at high school - perhaps at work where the spiritual tone is so different from the one Christians inhabit - but the choices of your *unsupervised loyalties* are put to the test. Those are the situations that determine whether or not God is your God. And even more specifically, those are the situations that reveal whether or not you have any other Gods *before* Him.

2) LOVING GOD EXCLUSIVELY MEANS BEING INSTANTLY WILLING TO RELINQUISH ALL ELSE AT ONLY HIS WORD - So here's the test. At His word, do I instantly relinquish what He calls me to relinquish? That's the only way to *demonstrate* my daily choice to follow Him.

Take a very familiar example of this truth from the Scriptures: Luke 18:18-23 - "And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" [19] And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. [20] You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.' " [21] And he said, "All these I have kept from my youth." [22] When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." [23] But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich."

The key to this whole story of this young ruler and his decision *not* to follow Jesus, is at the heart of the second point in this message: *loving God exclusively means being instantly willing to relinquish all else at only His word*. The story of the rich young ruler is in the Scriptures to correct one very common discipleship mistake. *I tend to measure righteousness solely in terms of the best things I do*. And that's very important. But it's not the whole story. Jesus *does* value our righteous good deeds greatly. But the test He applies to the rich young ruler measures something in addition. *Righteous deeds* can reveal that I love Jesus. But *relinquishment of other loves* is the only measurement of unrivaled *devotion*.

What is it that *dies* on this cross? And here's the secret of undiscovered joy for many disciples. Because what the cross kills is the root of *future sin and misery*. The trick, of course, is when we *renounce* these secret masters they kick and scream and tell us we'll be miserable without them. They're like a burglar who tells us he only broke into our house at night to polish our silverware. Self-crucifixion always involved *faith* in God's *future joy for our lives*. Joy can only enter our hearts as the idols exit. That's the hard-to-learn lesson that escapes many Christians until it's too late.

The Apostle James challenges this very issue in our hearts as we follow Jesus: James 4:13-16 - "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit'— [14] yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. [15] Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.' [16] As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil."

So many miss the heart of those words. James sees these Christian people, slowly but surely starting to live their lives like they were totally their own to do with as they pleased. That's the whole issue of those words. And with an aching heart, he says, "*What are you people doing? You left the right to organize your own lives at your own discretion a long time ago. You're starting to talk and act like you are the determiner of your future plans and actions.*"

3) TO LOVE GOD EXCLUSIVELY MEANS RE-ESTABLISHING HIS DOMINION IN MY LIFE LONG BEFORE HIS RULE HAS EVER BEEN BROKEN - Let me share with you what may be the most important words David ever penned: Psalms 16:8 - "I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken."

Those aren't David's *theological* words. They're his *lifestyle* words. They describe a practice that, by his own admission, was the habit that kept him on his feet in his relationship with God. And the important word for our study at this point is that word, "*always*." This is not something David did *one time*, or *occasionally*, or even *frequently*. Only "*always*" means *always*. "*In absolutely everything I do, in every minute of the day, whether I'm happy or sad, sick or healthy, in rain or shine, I keep God in my face! Right in front of my face. Eyeball to eyeball close, so I don't lose the imprint of His style, His influence, the look on His face of pleasure or sorrow, in anything I do.*"

Those who have lived the Christian life for a little while and have matured in the Lord know that you don't just *choose God* like you vote for a leader. The choice for an exclusive relationship with God must be re-established with each fresh situation where something else must be relinquished to His rule. *Establishing the exclusive rule of God in life is challenging because it's like holding inflated balloons under water.* False gods press towards the surface of life.

- 4) **THE MOTIVE BEHIND GOD'S FIRST COMMAND - Exodus 20:1-2 - "And God spoke all these words, saying, [2] 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.'"**

God's commands always lead out of the house of slavery. All other gods only bring bondage. Hear God's reminder today: "*I'm the One who led you out of Egypt. Back there, in Egypt, the bondage gods still reign. The only reason those Egyptians don't know it, is they've lived there all their lives. But I'm calling you out of all of that.*"

Kick out the enslaving gods. You recognize them because they scream whenever you threaten them. Give your devotion to the One who constantly brings people *out of* slavery.