

GOD IS # 1!

Second in series, Ten Commandments Revisited
The First Commandment

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
January 13, 1985

Matthew 5:17-20; 6:19-24

We like to be winners! Stadiums sell gloves with enlarged index fingers, lettered, "We're # 1." I understand there is something happening next Sunday afternoon in our fair city that has people excited; the police worried, but the citizens excited! The locals are eagerly expecting our team to be # 1. A teacher asked her third grade class to list the eleven greatest men in the country today. After they wrote for a while, one boy raised his hand, "I can list nine, but I don't know who to choose for center or right tackle." Bob Hope says there never will be a winning women's football team because once the ladies get in the huddle, they will never stop talking and come out.

Anyway, we all like to be winners, # 1. It was not planned, honestly, but is it significant that the sermon next week on Super Bowl Sunday, continuing the series on the Ten Commandments, is the second commandment, idol worship? I can hardly wait to hear what I'm going to say.

We like to be winners. When I was in high school in rural Minnesota, with about 200 students in grades 7-12, our football and basketball teams never won a game, all through my junior and senior high school years, six years! We weren't # 1, but we were winners. I feel I was a winner. We learned how to lose graciously. We learned how to support one another, have fun together, maintain self-respect; we learned morality and respect for one another. I had opportunities in that small school that many kids today don't have. I acted in the plays, was a reporter and editor of the school paper, a member of the debate team. Student Council, class President, played trombone in the band, sang in the glee club. We even had a five-piece German band in which I played the trombone. Such opportunities I had! I was a winner. Do you have to be # 1 to be a winner?

A little competition is good; it drives us, motivates us to be and do our best, especially when you compete with yourself. But, the problem with competition and the constant desire to be # 1 is that there then are losers. If there is a # 1, then there is a # 2, and a # 3. The problem with putting people in positions according to their importance is that there is then a top, and a bottom. Every top has a bottom; every winner has a loser; every head has a foot.

Perhaps a significant meaning of the first commandment--"You shall have no other gods before me"--is to let God be # 1 and let people be people, brothers and sisters, a team, all winners. Like it is in Lake Woebegone! Do you listen to the popular Saturday evening public radio show, "Prairie Home Companion?" It comes from Minnesota. Garrison Keilor describes Lake Woebegone as a small town in central Minnesota where all the women are strong, all the men are handsome, and all the children are above average! Sounds like our church! Our children are all above average. Wouldn't you like to live in a country where all the children are above average? Wouldn't you like to teach in a school where all the children are above average? It's a matter of expectation. I am reminded of the experiment where children were placed in classes at random, without attention to tracking. One teacher was told that her children tested very well, that they were above average. The other teacher was told that her children tested poorly, that they were below average. At the end of the semester, each class's achievement test scores reflected the bias of the teacher. Let's stop prioritizing people and categorizing people. Let God be # 1 and all the people be winners. A refreshing experience each summer is our Family Camp where we practice that philosophy. All the teams are inter-generational with ages 6-60; each one helps and encourages the others, where we develop winners without having to be # 1.

Trying to be # 1 does something to people. Are # 1's that happy? Are # 1's all that successful in what counts? Yesterday, birthday parties were held to celebrate Elvis Presley's 50th birthday. He was a # 1, but died at such a young age. He was a # 1, but his success was haunted with stress, pressure, fast pace and drugs.

Let God be # 1. It works much better when God is # 1, and we are his people, gathered around God, centered in God, giving God the honor and glory; and living, working together as a family, a team. Help one another; help one another to excel; help one another to be a winner. Help each other to discover his or her talents and gifts that are given by God, to glorify God and to be an example to the world of how God wants us to live. Let God be # 1, and treat one another as winners.

This system, prescribed by the Ten Commandments, works not only corporately, not only for people trying to live together, but it works equally well for us as individuals. "You shall have no other gods before me," means that God is to be # 1 in your life; that God is to be the highest priority.

Have you known people who do not live by priorities? That is the first place to start when you want to live successfully. Make priorities. Some don't. Their lives are in chaos, confusion. They are victims of the wind; wherever the wind blows, they go. They are victimized by others: doing whatever they are told, following whoever is strong. They can't say "no." They use such expressions as, "I don't really know who I am." Knowing who you are is a matter of choice, a matter of commitment. You are who you choose to be, and choosing is a matter of setting and living by priorities.

The commandments teach us that we all need to live by priorities, and the first commandment emphatically asserts that God is to be # 1. Your life works smoothly and successfully when God is # 1. Note how the wording of this commandment presupposes the existence of other gods. The Hebrews at the time of Moses, when this commandment was given, were not yet monotheists. They did not yet believe in the existence of only one God; but, they believed in monolatry: they believed in the existence of many gods, but practiced allegiance to only one, the God who led them out of Egypt and was now entering into covenant with them. They believed the other gods existed, but were powerless in the presence of Yahweh, their God. Elijah the prophet challenged the prophets of the god, Baal, to a duel to end the drought. Yahwah answered Elijah's prayers with a mighty rain.

Sometimes it is easy for us moderns to pass over this commandment lightly and say, "Sure, I believe there is only one God." It is now culturally correct to be monotheists. But, the real meaning of the commandment is to decide between gods, to decide between those movements, or causes, or desires that want our supreme loyalty. The question is, "Which god will you follow? Which god will be # 1 in your life?"

Shall it be pleasure? Whatever feels good, do it? Is your physical body--its appetites and desires--worthy enough to be # 1 in your life? Is ambition worthy? You may choose to serve ambition. You may want to be # 1, to be at the top, to have more money, more luxuries than your neighbors, or your brother or sister. You may be very competitive with your family and friends. But, will ambition take the place of God when your kids get in trouble, when your spouse goes to the hospital, when your business fails, when you are lonely, when you are on your death bed? Do you really want to be # 1?

Let God be # 1 in your life. To understand what this means, we begin with the covenant. I asked you last week if you consciously considered daily the realization that you are in covenant with God. Did you try it this week? God, because of love for you, has extended himself, even to the point of suffering and dying, to reach out to you and receive you. Your part of the covenant is to accept God's love and live as one of God's people--beginning with the Ten Commandments--so that you might be an

example to those around you. Let God be # 1 in your life; your life will work better. For God is the creator, the one who made you. God is the center of values and morality. God is the spirit that moves in our lives and in our society, saving, rescuing, making the wrong right and the evil good. God saves us from ourselves; from greed, ambition, social climbing.

How do you know what god you are serving and following? How do you know what has the # 1 priority in your life? There are several tests. Jesus gave us a simple one, so simple and basic it is scary. You don't have to take the Minnesota Multiphasic, or a management test, or a values test to ascertain your loyalties and priorities. Jesus gave the test to us in our gospel lesson today, Matthew 6:21, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." The year is new. You will soon be doing your income tax. You can discover easily what receives your greatest loyalty. The biblical method is simple. All you have and all you are belongs to God. God has entrusted your life to you--the resources, your skills, talents, even the planet, his creation. Your part of the covenant, to let God be # 1 in your life, is to practice the tithe. The tithe means that you get to keep 90% for your own needs, and give 10% of your income and assets to the work of God. God has worked out a plan whereby you take care of yourself and your family and do God's ministry as well. There's the test. How did you do?

Let God be # 1, and let people be people, all above average, all winners. Let God be # 1 in your life, and you live in covenant. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. I led you here to Palo Alto. I gave you your health. I gave you your talents, abilities and skills. I placed you in a family. I called you to my church. I have saved you. I love you. I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me."

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