

REQUIRED OF HUMANS: SINGLE-MINDED DEVOTION

by Steve Zeisler

Earlier this summer an old friend and I reminisced about a ministry trip we had taken to the Northwest almost 20 years ago while we were still students. I came within an eyelash of not going, but decided at the last minute to join the group. The trip began with an airplane flight in bad weather, which necessitated an unexpected landing in the Seattle airport. Although I have memories of God accomplishing great things on campus through that ministry, what I primarily remember about the trip was the change in plans that sent me to Seattle. It allowed me to spend the day with Leslie, the woman who is now my wife. We had been good friends for several years up to that point, but we rarely saw one another because she was in the Northwest and I was in northern California. Although she was involved with a young man who wanted to marry her, our impromptu day together in Seattle was the turning point at which we began to fall in love.

We all can look back at various turning points in our lives. There are events that we anticipated as being important, and we knew the choices involved would affect the subsequent course of our life. There are occasions more like the one I just described, however, in which I had no idea that my choice to spend a week in ministry would lead me to my future wife. Yet God knew that it was a turning point, a fork in the road. Likewise, there are choices you have made over your lifetime involving whether or not to go to a particular school, regarding military service or a career path, an investment, an adventure, a relationship. If we are thoughtful about our own history, we could mark out forks in the road that led us in a direction, and that from which we have turned aside is left behind forever. We became different people and hopefully as we serve the Lord, we see the glory of God resulting from the choices we have made.

I want to advocate the critical importance of thoughtfully responding to God as he lays before us choices that affect the course of our lives. I believe that we live in a world that is syncretistic about spiritual things. Our culture is gradually shifting to a belief that choices concerning God and his purposes are of less importance. Thus, there are no forks in the road as regards God, but everything leads to the same place spiritually. Decisions about right and wrong are not an issue in terms of spiritual thinking, as there are only varieties of right options. Every nod we make to any kind of spiritual being or any feeling to which we might associate the name of God are equally valid and enlightening, and they are equally likely to lead us to salvation. We live among people who increasingly are inclined to believe that all of us are headed to a universal consciousness. God is not a person who has convictions of his own, but is more like a life-force, a unifying factor which helps us discover the divinity within us. Unfortunately, these themes are familiar to all of us.

Based on the word of God, however, that strain of thought is extremely dangerous. God is a person, and we must make choices that he presents to us. Those choices will produce a fork in the road that leads to life at one juncture or death at another. The truth is that God can be known and we can respond to him, or he can be rejected. If we would turn anywhere to hear the themes of the importance of a proper response to God, the law of God is the place to turn.

Last week we began a series of messages examining the rudiments of our faith, the laws in the Old Testament and the Ten Commandments in particular. Today, our study will be in Exodus 20, taking themes that are raised by the law. Hopefully, we will be challenged by them, and will see the choices laid before us which result in life or death. Perhaps we will be convicted by the Spirit so that the path we choose at the fork in the road is a path that will lead us towards life.

Before we begin our discussion of the first commandment, I want to make some comments about the Ten Commandments in general. The law was featured twice in the Old Testament. The Exodus 20 passage is a historical record of Israel's wandering in the wilderness. We read of the dread events at Mount Sinai, a solemn moment of darkness and fire and the voice of God from heaven decreeing that no one should touch the mountain. In addition, the Ten Commandments are given a second time in Deuteronomy 5, a message that

Moses preached at the end of his life and Israel's wanderings. There are some slight nuances of difference, but essentially the same table of laws is given as Moses preached an impassioned message about what God had done among the people.

Another feature worth noting about the Ten Commandments is that the content is divisible into two sections. The first part deals with our relationship to God, and how we respond to one another. They are about a vertical relationship, and directs our eyes toward heaven. The second half of the remaining commandments concern our relationship to one another. They are laws dealing with getting along and the proper response we should have to each another. Thus, the law concerns two great themes, the relationship of humanity to God, and the relationship within the human family.

Another observation worth noting is that most of the commandments are cast in negatives: Do not steal, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not bear false witness. The reason for that is to counteract our tendency as people to take things into our own hands. Our inclination is to respond to the minimum, to let ourselves off the hook regarding responsibility. By telling us what to avoid, the Lord has left us with open-ended choices as to what we should do. For example, once I conclude that I must not murder, what then am I responsible to do? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus answered that by taking the words "Do not murder" and applying them to the attitude of harboring hatred towards our brother and sister. It shows that whenever we let our hearts convict and execute someone we are as guilty of breaking the commandment as if we had taken a knife to their throat or a gun to their head. Thus, once we hear the Lord's word about what to avoid we are left with a walk of faith to question, "What *should* I do, Lord?"

The apostle Peter's questioned Jesus as to how many times he should forgive his brother. Was seven times seven enough? he asked. The Lord responded that we must be willing to forgive an infinite number of times, 70 times 7. Once we hear God's commands in terms of obedience to his word, we need to follow his direction so that we know what to do and what we must avoid. So we need to keep in mind why the commandments are given in the negative.

Perhaps most important to our discussion is that the laws are polemical, they are given in the midst of rivalry. That is why we began by saying that the choices we make are critical. There is a war going on, and the supreme commander is saying that if we would be his people we must act a certain way, because there are treacherous opportunities and consequences on every end. Other gods and other voices are presenting opposing ways to live. We must hear these commandments to morality not as if they are obvious and accepted, but because they are uniquely from our Lord whom we have chosen to serve. We are in a covenant with him, and these mark us as his people. They will always be chosen in the midst of other voices and temptations, amidst wily counsel suggesting they are not true and telling us to go another way. We have to stand and choose to respond obediently to what God has said to be true for us because there are rivals to counteract his word.

With those principles in mind, let us begin at Exodus 20. Although our focus will be on the first commandment in verse 3, I will also read the next two since they are a subpoint and inform the first commandment.

Then the Lord spoke all these words saying, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You are not to make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them, for I the Lord am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children on the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, showing loving kindness to thousands to those who love me.

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. For the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes his name in vain.

The commandments to avoid idolatry and taking the Lord's name in vain are connected to the response of God.

Serious consequences follow those who disobey. To hear the clear statement of God and to reject it is to be in the category of those who hate him. We find that in his jealousy, God takes our rejection of him seriously because his love is full and he is longing to bless us to a thousand generations. God is holy, right, and good, and we are best served if we love him. He states in verse two, "I am the one who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. I am your deliverer." Therefore, we must choose to give him first place in our lives.

The first words of the decalogue are powerful: Have no other gods in preference to me. Do not admit any rivals onto the field. There are other voices and words coming into our minds all the time. There are other philosophies, points of view, and offers being made to us from sources that would try to convince us that our God will not protect us, that we cannot trust him fully. The choice we need to make is to fix our gaze entirely upon the one God, to put no other gods before him. The words "before me" means "in the presence of my face." We are to be concerned to give honor to him as Lord so that no one else might usurp his position in our lives.

Secondly, our response to him must not be in part but a total commitment. Recall Deuteronomy 6:5, the great *shema* of the Jews: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might." Jesus quoted that verse and added that we are to love God with our total being; not just our intellectual assent, but our soul, our might, and our strength. We are to have no other rivals to him, and our response is to be full and complete.

To understand the significance of this statement we need to ask what the other gods would have offered to these ancient people. The Jews lived among nations such as Egypt, Canaan and Mesopotamia that had very clear forms of worship. There are records of the descriptions of the idols they made. We can go to the British Museum, for example, and see reliefs and other evidence that are clear pictures of gods that the ancient peoples worshiped. As Israel dwelt in Egypt and made its way through the wilderness to Canaan, they encountered Baal, Molech and Asherah as integral parts of the worshiping communities surrounding them. What did these ancient gods do for the people? What did it mean to choose another god for them in place of Yahweh?

The gods served two primary purposes in the lives of the people, and we will find them as recurring themes in our experience as well. First, the gods of the ancient people took them to war and fought for them. As the enemy approached, the people would appeal to the god for defense and protection, and the gods would in turn provide security for their adherents. Secondly, they provided fertility. The gods were worshiped so that the land would bear fruit, the animals would have offspring, and so that sex would result in children. They called on their gods for abundance, riches, life, and vitality.

I submit that it is no different today. Not often do we have idols of wood or stone formed into bulls or phallic symbols, or temples to their worship. However, the rivals of the Lord God in our experience will offer us the same two advantages. Are you insecure and afraid? Are you worried about the dangers in life, enemies who threaten you emotionally or financially? If so, the gods of our generation will sing a siren song to you as well: "You can be made secure, not by trusting God, but by trusting in another." Likewise, do you long for abundance, riches, comfort, joy, and vitality? Do you wish life tasted better, more full of delightful experience? The gods who would rival our Lord in this age are as quick as the ancient gods to offer abundance. Security and abundance are what the modern rivals of our Lord offer as well.

Recently, I read a poll taken by a government agency dealing with Americans' concerns. The purpose was to determine people's perception of what issues the government should be addressing. On the national level, the dominant themes in the survey had to do with the war on drugs, concern for the deterioration of our cities, and the desire that the government or some other champion would remove the threat of violence from our neighborhoods. Another concern called for the medical community to deal with terrifying diseases, such as AIDS and cancer, to fight off the enemy of physical deterioration. In terms of international concerns, defense spending was considered an important issue. It showed that Americans are willing to expend an incredible amount of our government's budget and productivity in return for security from atomic warfare or other sorts of attack. The data from the survey revealed a direct plea for someone to go to war for us, to deal with the vicious enemies that are robbing us of life.

We are afraid, we are insecure as a people, and we expend a tremendous amount of money in this culture to counteract the fears that guide us. We are willing to direct our resources to obtain a measure of security from the ravages of illness, age, and deterioration. In spiritual terms, people are crying out for a protector, a god to go to war and fight the enemy. As Christians, we let the government or a secret society do it for us. The National Rifle Association, for example, has an advocacy plan that will provide security for the people: Take up arms, defend yourself. It is no different than what the Black Panthers preached in the '60's and '70's. Every age has gurus that will offer their plans for safety.

I was astonished this week when a woman recounted the amount of time and money she had given over to finding mental health in her life. She is a woman who is utterly terrified of emotional instability and feels violated and misunderstood in her world. She is desperate and terrified. As a result, she has listened to spokesmen and spiritual healers, bought drugs, and gone to psychiatrists. She has exhausted herself and her resources in the quest for some kind of defense against the fear she has of losing her mind. She does not understand that it is impossible to listen to every voice and grasp every answer that is offered. In our experience, we must move from that kind of experience to one in which God can be trusted to protect us.

Last week I mentioned that we flew to Indonesia earlier this summer for a ministry trip. A few weeks before, a DC-10 in Iowa had crashed and the papers were full of stories about the mechanical problems that are affecting the these planes. I kept thinking, "These people know how to maintain planes?" I know that there were a number of people who stopped flying for a period of time out of fear. Again we must ask, is there some kind of protection? Is there some way standards can be tighter? Is there someone we can punish? Is there something we can do to make ourselves safe? It is no different for us than it was for the ancient people. We are afraid, and we want someone to minister to our fear.

The second thing that the gods provided is also as prevalent today as it was in ancient times. It is the quest for abundance, life, vitality, and joy. The sexual excesses of pagan worship were nothing more than attempts to urge the gods to act in behalf of the people so that rain would come and the crops would grow. Although we are more confident at being able to grow food in this country perhaps, we want vitality in other areas. We want happy homes, responsive children, the brightest and best to grow up in our homes and our neighborhoods. We take drugs because we want a "high," an excitement and joy that daily life does not seem to have. We have expensive amusements and toys to escape the reality of our normal existence. Many escape by being vicariously connected to celebrity. Lottery winners become instant heroes. People imagine themselves among the rich and famous, living out fantasies of yachts and mansions. This activity is a cry out to the heavens that we want vitality. We do not want just enough to get by, we want an abundance of delight in life.

Jesus spoke to these two themes in pagan worship when he said, "My peace I leave with you, not as the world gives, but I come to give security and peace. I have come to deal with terror and fear." It was Jesus who said, "I've come to give you life and give it more abundantly." He confirmed that the longing for those things is not inappropriate. God made us so that we would not have to live life dominated by fear and insecurity. He made us so that we would hope to have vitality and joy in life. The critical issue is whether we will insist on turning aside every other rival and focus on the Lord God and his commands: You shall have no other gods before me, trust me for these things, refuse every other voice. We must cling tight to the God who revealed himself on Sinai, to the God who revealed himself in Christ. We must place our hope in him and him alone. There will be times when it is not clear how he will respond, or he is slower than we want him to be, or it appears that there is more cost involved than we want to make. Every time those temptations and pressures arise, refuse to listen to them, because our God loves us enough to want to bless a thousand generation to follow us. He is longing to pour himself out for us, but we cannot get there without our decision to choose him. We cannot arrive at a vital life and true security as God would give us, unless we are willing to take up the fight, unless we are willing to choose him against all other options.

Deuteronomy is a book of Moses that was the final urging of an elderly man who lived long, learned much, and was imploring his people to see the dangers of choosing the right fork in the road. Moses' last weeks and months of life did not consist of gently setting into the sunset. It consisted of impassioned preaching to the people about the stakes involved. All choices are not equal, he said; all gods will not give life. If you reject Yahweh and listen to another, if you are tempted away to choose another, then you have surely chosen your own horrible judgment.

Joshua preached a similar message to Moses' at the end of his life. The land had been conquered, and Joshua was about to go the way of his fathers. I want us to read his words in Joshua 24:14 because they are succinct and powerful:

"Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and truth and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the river and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve." Joshua pointed out that the people could not avoid making a choice by drifting between gods. Choose whom you will serve, he challenged. If you reject the Lord, then stand up and say so. Choose whether it will be the God whom your fathers served beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorite in the land you are now living. He added , "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

It is not enough that we are determined. It is not enough to be stirred by the music, the scriptures, a voice in the front of the room who encourages us to obedience. It is not enough because once the choice is made there are many lessons to learn about weakness, forgiveness, the power of God and his grace. The old covenant is not enough, the new covenant must replace it in the heart. My burden this morning is that you hear that you must be more than determined in resolve. There are many things to be learned, and the point of determination to the point of spiritual maturity is a long road. Yet anyone who refuses to be determined has lost his way. Anyone who chooses another god will be doomed. Anyone who does not want God with all his soul, mind and strength and listens to the rivals' voice has not even begun the path that will lead to maturity.

The call of God from heaven through his law can set us right again. There are rivals out there, voices that will repeatedly offer you protection and security to deal with your fears. They will promise to fix your problems, and will take your time, your money and your allegiance with the false promise that they will return to you an umbrella of protection. They will offer you a life full of joy and vitality like the ancient gods, but they will fail in that regard as well. The word of Joshua is that we must begin by choosing. We must recognize the polemic of the Ten Commandments that there is a war going on and choices to be made that are critically important to who we will become.

Let us conclude our discussion by rereading Joshua's words again:

"Therefore, hear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the river and in Egypt. Serve the Lord. And if it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourself today whom you will serve, the gods whom your fathers served beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

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Exodus 20:2-3
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