

“Keep number One, first!”

Pako Evening Service: 12<sup>th</sup> February 2017

Scripture Reading: Isa 44:6-23; Exo 20:3; Sermon: “Keep number One, first!”

Beloved people of God,

Over the next few weeks I want to look a little closer at God’s law. We know it is good for us, and indeed it is a blessing from God that He gave us the law. Without it we wouldn’t know we are sinners and therefore would not know that we need a Saviour. As Paul reminds us in Romans 7:7, “I would not have known what coveting was if the law had not said. ‘Do not covet.’” So God’s law is a gift from God for it makes us aware of our sin and need for a Saviour and guides our daily living as well as restraining evil in our society.

Now the first command is that you shall have no other gods before Him! Or if you prefer, “You shall have no other gods except the true God alone.” Or differently still, “You shall have no other gods against the true God alone!” This I suggest is the sense of this first command. But why would God insist on that? Well, let’s allow the context of Exodus 20:3 to determine it. The Israelites experienced the hand of God saving them from the oppressive regime of Egypt. They experienced God sending plague after plague, forcing their enemy into submission. They experienced God separating the sea so that they could cross on dry land and their enemy drown behind them. They experienced God feeding them manna and meat from heaven.

Why would they even contemplate bowing down to another god! However, despite God’s marvellous acts of redemption and care, people seem to quickly place other ‘gods’ alongside the One True God. In fact, the Bible assumes that people worship many gods and lords. For instance, Ps 95:3; “For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods.” By the way, the Bible isn’t saying there are other gods, but simply recognising that sinful man is quick to make their own gods!

However, the Bible teaches that there is only One True God, and that all other imaginary gods are ‘nothings’ as Isa 44 so clearly spells out! They cannot save as God has done. Their eyes are plastered shut! They cannot speak or think. They are nothings!

Therefore, God demands that his people worship Him, the One True God, the One who has delivered them. Or in New Testament language, God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and no one else, is to receive wholehearted worship, love and trust and that is why we teach and plead with the world to repent and believe and worship God alone!

Now whether we worship God alone is a life and death choice. That is how serious it is. For the reality is, that as soon as you say there is another God worthy of your worship and adoration, you are not only deceiving yourself, you are endangering your very salvation!

Why? Because there simply isn’t another ‘God’ who can save! So it is imperative that we keep this first command, otherwise we will be in danger of the fires of hell! And furthermore, if we place God second or third, or alongside some of our own gods, all the other commands cannot be maintained.

Then we cannot protect our neighbour’s life, or his wife or his goods if the most fundamental command to keep number one first is disobeyed. Therefore, what should be foremost in our minds all the time is how to express that obedience to this first command.

And I suggest one way is to keep one question in your mind, “What would God have me do this day?” Now some people say we shouldn’t bring God into every equation. But why not? Paul reminds us in Acts 17:28, that “In him we live and move and have our being.” We cannot even breath or take a step without His blessing. Therefore, it makes sense that God should be the first thing we think about. All of life is for God and his glory! So what we think of God must be seen in personal relationships, in the way we do business, in fact, it should be seen in every square centimetre of our lives!

And as soon as we allow the answer to that fundamental question to slip, all other relationships will be out of wack! If we don’t consider what God the Father would have us do, then what is taking His place? I’ll tell you, we are placing ‘self’ before God and we will be guilty of idolatry. Often this ‘idolatry’ reveals itself in the love of money, wealth, possessions and status.

If we don’t obey the first command, then our relationship to fellow brother and sisters, between husbands and wives, parents and children will be strained if not altogether impossible. So how can we make sure make sure that God as

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number one is first? Scripture teaches us that if we are truly serious about serving the only true God as Lord, then we turn away from idolatry. That is the most fundamental characteristic feature of ‘born again’ people. People may say they love God, but if it cannot be seen that He is first in their lives, then we may have our doubts. True and obedient Christians seek the kingdom of God first, and it begins by obedience to the first command to love God. Because if we don’t seek to love God first then the new building of life that we are trying to build will never get off the ground.

If we seek out and trust some magic words or superstitious rites, or prayer to saints or to other creatures, or depend on astrology, or tarot cards, or eastern type religious activities, or even in our own strength and abilities, rather on the one true God, we are being disobedient. Then we are sinning against the first commandment. God alone is the fountain of all good things. We don’t honour God if we seek the protection of saints and the power of magic words, or the guidance of some silly pack of cards with fancy pictures.

No matter how well meaning these people are that do these things, if they or we bow before anything else except the true God, then we insult God. Just as it would be a bitter insult to an earthly father if his own children went to the neighbour for protection and help, so our Father in heaven cannot stand it when we bypass him and go somewhere else.

A church that teaches that the saints are lobbyists in heaven, or that an idol shaped with human hands and fingers can influence our final destiny robs the cross of its power. Doing so is transgressing the very first commandment. If God is God, and he is, then we trust him completely. And if we trust in anything alongside of God, then we have committed idolatry.

And idolatry is the most basic temptation of the human heart. John Calvin said our hearts are a factory of idols, and hence we need to be constantly on our guard against them. The knowledge of Scripture is of great benefit here. In Matthew 4, we read about the Lord Jesus being led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. This was the beginning of the battle between trusting in His Father, or committing adultery. The stakes of the battle were high, far higher than you and I will ever face.

In Mat 4:8, we read, “All the kingdoms of the world, and their splendour” were at stake. And this battle could only be won by obedience to the first commandment. In the first temptation Jesus had to answer the question, “Would He trust God even if He had to suffer?” Jesus passed the test with flying colours, a test that Israel had failed. Israel had thought that unless it had bread, life was not worth living (Deut 8:3). But Jesus knew that just because you have something to eat doesn’t mean you have life.

We have life, or we are alive when we obey what comes out of the mouth of the Lord. Obedience to the Word of God is life. And this remains the basic test that we all have to pass. A job is not the most important thing in life, nor is food, or education, or our health or our spouse or children, homes, farms, businesses, cars, motorbikes. Our happiness and self-satisfaction are not most important nor the measure of having lived!

Do you know what is most important? To have God first in your life. If we have Him and obey Him, we cannot lose. But if we have everything else and disobey him, we have nothing. Now please, don’t underestimate the attraction of idols, especially things and people on which we depend. You and I must learn the way of obedience, which means we must give up anything rather than go against God’s will in any way.

We must trust God so much that we know him, not just superficially, but that every thought, every deed, every word is made captive for Jesus. And the wonder is that we can and may know him deep down. God has made himself known in creation and in the Words of Scripture, through the work of his Holy Spirit, but more than all of that, He has been revealed in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

When we know Christ then we know God, and that means we cannot lose. Doesn’t mean an easy life, on the contrary, we are called to suffer as Jesus suffered. Even if we lose the respect of all people, all our money, even the love of relatives, we cannot lose if we put God first. So what are some of the gods that you place before God? Oh I know, most of you would say there isn’t anything, I guess that is the right noise to make.

But I challenge you to think seriously about the question. That is what they did in OT times. The Patriarchs set periods of time aside to cleanse themselves from idols (Gen 35:2). Idols have a habit of sneaking into our lives. I think it is a good practice to ask what idols have sneaked into our lives occasionally. Is it nation, traditions, family, your affluence your money, your love of art or music, your status with your so-called friends? Perhaps it’s the letters behind your

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name, your academic degree! Now none these things are necessarily idols, nor are they ugly. All of them are God given. But they become idols when we give them what is due to God alone. Let me say it again, it is only the true God of the Scriptures who is allowed to have the first place in your life. Whatever has the first place in your lives that is your god!

Now when we really think seriously about this command, then we may have to give up valuable things. Perhaps ungodly relationships; your love for a sport; or certain types of entertainment may need to go. But do it, for your very salvation may depend on your decision. Recently I lead a worship service elsewhere and upon my arrival, the elder of service immediately apologized that more of their young people wouldn't be there that morning.

When I asked why, he told me that there had been a birthday the previous evening. Seriously? What does a birthday party the previous evening got to do with not coming to worship the one and only true God? What's wrong with saying to your guests at 11.00 pm, “Guys, thanks for coming, but my family and I wish to be fit for worship tomorrow, so we're going to wind-up and retire for the evening?”

What a shame when so called Christians put God second or third or only where he doesn't disrupt our plans, whether it be a sport, or party. I have known people who call themselves Christians who attend a live footy game before they attend a live worship service! So sad and I think very disobedient of the first command.

Charles Spurgeon says that if we could save a loved one or perhaps any person from drowning by having a painful operation to lengthen our arm by 10 cms, then we would gladly do it. Congregation, one day you will have to stand before the judge of the universe. Keep number one first now and it won't be a problem then!

And of course, we need to be honest with ourselves. It can be a constant struggle for some of us to keep number one first and sometimes we fail. That's OK, for there is forgiveness for our failings. But don't make it a habit. Farming example – cow which fell in the creek.

My prayer is that the more you realize what God has done for you in Christ, the more you will desire love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. The people of Israel saw the great miraculous signs of God when he delivered them. But the greatest of all miracles has been left for us to see and know.

When people do not have God first, then they are either still dead in their sin, or they have not yet fully understood the greatest miracle of all time. The miracle of God sending his only Son to the cross to save us is surely the greatest blessing and incentive to love God above all.

Tell me, who of all the gods saved you from hell? Who set you on the path to glory? Did you do it yourself? Of course not! You were dead already in God's eyes. Did your mates at work? Of course not, for they too were dead in God's eyes. Did your money, your house, motor bikes, cars, your wealth? Of course not!

That was all given to you from God's Fatherly hand! Surely you can see and know that the greatest miracle is Jesus saving us and Him alone! And when we fully understand that then we can appreciate how much it would pain God to see us lean on an idol.

Then suddenly it makes sense, when we read that epistle of love, 1 John. “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (3:1). “This is how we know what love it: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us!” (3:16) “This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins!”(4:9-10) Do you know how the “Epistle of love” finishes? (1 Jn 5:21) Let's put it in 21<sup>st</sup> century language, “Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Christian Reformed Church of Geelong, “Keep yourselves from idols!” Keep number One first! Amen.