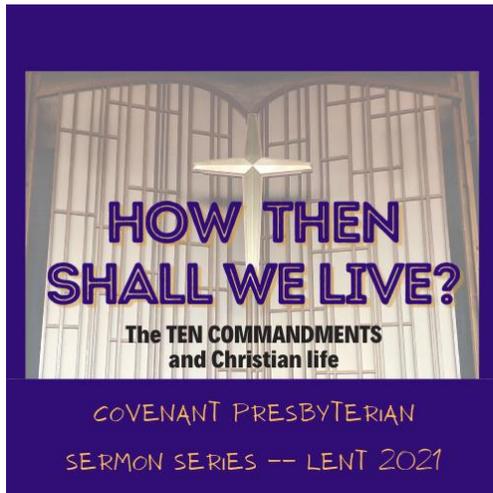


## How Then Shall We Live Lenten Series: "Seek Ye First"

MATTHEW 6:24-33

CHARLIE BERTHOUD | SERMON FOR SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2021



On the first Sunday of every month, we have a litany in our worship service based on the Ten Commandments.

After we confess our sin and hear again that God is gracious, merciful and forgiving, the worship leader says something like:

As forgiven people, as loved people, how then shall we live?

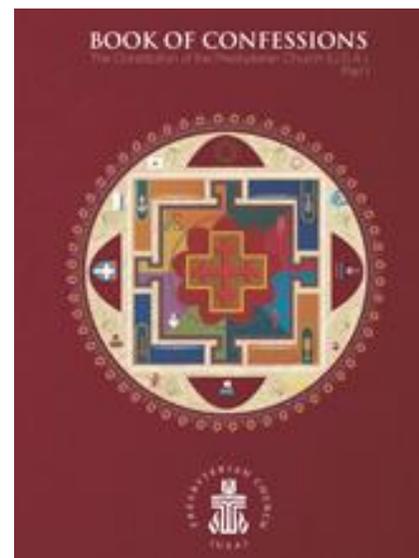
Then we recite a version of the Ten Commandments.

The order is important, as it reflects biblical and theological truth. In the book of Exodus, we read about how the Hebrew people suffered as slaves in Egypt—in Exodus 5. God led them out of slavery, rescuing them and leading them to the promised land—in Exodus 13 and 14. Only after saving the people did God give the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20.

God did NOT tell the people they had to follow all the rules in order to be saved. The commandments were NOT a precondition for God to act. God acted first, saving the people and then giving the commandments to shape their lives. We see the same pattern in one of the theological statements of the Presbyterian Church—the Heidelberg Catechism, written in 1562, one of 12 statements in our Book of Confessions.

Briefly, the catechism is split into three parts:

1. **Misery**: describing our struggle with sin



2. **Deliverance**: describing God's love in Jesus Christ
3. **Gratitude**: describing how we can respond, including a reflection on the Ten Commandments

So the commandments are NOT given as a way for us to earn God's love. They are a way for us to respond to God's love. They are guardrails and guideposts for us.

We are focusing on these ten commandments over the five Sundays of Lent—a season when Christians think about repenting, about turning around, about getting back on track, about living with more integrity as one called a Christian—a child of God, a follower of Jesus.

Listen now for God's word from Exodus chapter 20, from *The Message*:

God spoke all these words:

I am God, your God,  
who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of a life of slavery.

No other gods, only me.

No carved gods of any size, shape, or form of anything whatever, whether of things that fly or walk or swim. Don't bow down to them and don't serve them because I am God, your God, and I'm a most jealous God, punishing the children for any sins their parents pass on to them to the third, and yes, even to the fourth generation of those who hate me. But I'm unswervingly loyal to the thousands who love me and keep my commandments.

No using the name of God, your God, in curses or silly banter; God won't put up with the irreverent use of his name.

Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Work six days and do everything you need to do. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to God, your God. Don't do any work—not you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your servant, nor your maid, nor your animals, not even the foreign guest visiting in your town. For in six days God made Heaven, Earth, and sea, and everything in

them; he rested on the seventh day. Therefore God blessed the Sabbath day; he set it apart as a holy day.

Honor your father and mother so that you'll live a long time in the land that God, your God, is giving you.

No murder.

No adultery.

No stealing.

No lies about your neighbor.

No lusting after your neighbor's house—or wife or servant or maid or ox or donkey. Don't set your heart on anything that is your neighbor's.

You just heard the ten commandments from *The Message* translation of the Bible, a contemporary version that often helps us hear familiar words in a new way.

In our five-week Lenten series on the ten commandments, I hope you'll hear them as more than a list of forbidden fruits, as God telling us we can't have any fun in life. I really think they are guardrails and guideposts for us, to help us move in the direction that God wants us to go.

Grammatically many of these verses use the future tense, the future negative, as if the words are inviting us into a new future. So we could hear these not simply as commandments, but as promises, as hopes.

It's as if God is saying: As you continue on the journey, as you grow in wisdom and faith, there will come a time when you will not worship idols and you will not covet, and you will honor the Sabbath, and you will honor your parents.

We can see the commandments as hopeful affirmations of our future.

Today our focus is on the first two, traditionally known as:

- 1. You shall have no other gods before me.**
- 2. You shall not make for yourself an idol.**

Interestingly, varying religious traditions number the commandments differently. Roman Catholics and Lutherans see these two commandments as one, for good reason as they reflect God's call for loyalty and focus and faithfulness.

Last week in the sermon about listening to God I spoke about how easily distracted we can get by our technology. Our TVs, our tablets, and our phones can become our idols, our sources of ultimate devotion.

In one of my favorite "Calvin and Hobbes" cartoons ever, Calvin stands before a TV, with a bowl in his outstretched arms and he says: "Oh greatest of the mass media, thank you for elevating emotion, reducing thought, and stifling imagination."

In the next frame, with his eyes closed and still holding the bowl, he says "Thank you for the artificiality of quick solutions and for the insidious manipulation of human desires for commercial purposes."

And in the final frame he has set the bowl in front of the TV and he is on his knees bowing down, saying "This bowl of lukewarm tapioca represents my brain. I offer it in humble sacrifice. Bestow thy flickering light forever."

That comic strip was first published in 1992. I can only imagine what Calvin would have to say about personal computers, tablets, and phones.

Now obviously we need our screens, especially in a pandemic when we can't gather for church. But the problem is that we lose balance and we get our priorities mixed up.

Over the past week, I've heard from several people who feel like their screen use is way out of balance, and I'm glad to hear people trying to get it back in balance.

Screens aren't the only source of imbalance in our lives. We also get mixed up with alcohol, food, money, job, sports, shopping, careers, and more.

We let basically good things (and some not so good things) take on too much influence in our lives. When these other things take over, they can easily push God off to the side.

Having a cookie or two is generally okay. Having twenty or thirty at a time is not.

Watching tv or playing a video game for an hour is okay, but multiple hours every day is not.

Sometimes idols get built in our churches. We worship the music program, or the mission program, or the building, or the Bible, or a staff member.

Worshipping idols is another way of saying that we've gotten our priorities out of balance, that we're focusing too much on the wrong things.

Lent is as good a time as any for us to take a deep breath and look at our lives, to think about what's really important, to see if anything is out of balance.

When people are asked to look at their lives, broadly speaking I see three ways of responding.

**DENIAL:** We feel attacked and are unable to really hear any legitimate issues of concern; it's called denial. This is common with alcohol. We get very defensive and are unable to hear any legitimate concerns. We dig in our heels and sometimes do more of the behavior in question.

**DESPAIR:** On the other end of the spectrum is despair, we feel like total failures, morally weak, and like with denial, we end up doing more of the behavior in question.

**DECISION:** The healthy response (and the hardest response) is to look honestly at the situation and make a decision to change direction and change priorities, one day at a time.

Lent goes all the way until April 4, giving us plenty of time to change directions, change habits, and get things back in balance.

Lent is about following Jesus, turning away from sin, and discovering new purpose

and abundant life.

So we explore the Bible, and say our prayers, and open ourselves to the possibility that God can heal us and change us.

Jesus offers us encouragement to focus on what is important, in Matthew chapter 6, saying:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Thanks be to God for the words of Scripture.

Jesus invites us to strive first for God’s kingdom, God’s rule, God’s word, God’s love. “Seek ye first” as the song goes. Jesus is essentially restating those first two commandments about not worshipping false gods or idols. When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment is, he said that we are to love God and love neighbor.

I like lists, as they help us prioritize things. Maybe we need to be making lists during Lent.

And a good thing to put at the top of our list every day is the greatest



commandment that Jesus gave us: love God and love neighbor.

Being a Christian is about loving the right things in the right way. If you've gotten off track, it's totally understandable. We are in a time of crisis, where people are struggling in all sorts of ways. So please be kind and gentle to yourself. But if you really are out of balance, if your priorities have gotten mixed up, then Lent is a good time to take a deep breath, and one step at a time, with

God's help, get back on track.

Thanks be to God for guideposts and guardrails. Thanks be to God for the opportunities to get back on track. Amen.