

**The Art of Living Well:  
Trust  
Exodus 17:1-7 and 20:1-2**

Do you remember the movie *City Slickers*? My favorite scene from that movie is when Curly--the big, quiet, dangerous cowboy who leads the city slickers on their roundup--turns to Mitch and says, "You know what the secret of life is?"

All of us are looking for the clues to a better life, how to make the most of out of our lives, how to handle the challenges that come our way, how to live a long life. One of the favorite questions that we ask those who make it to 90 or a 100 years old is "what's the secret to your longevity?" Well, the Bible has a lot to say about what makes for a good life, and how to get the most out of this life that God has given us. And of all the instructions that are in the Bible, the most basic list of instructions is the Ten Commandments. So today we're beginning a series called "The Art of Living Well," and in this series we're going to look closely at the ten commandments as God's instructions for the living a good life.

Now you may think of the Ten Commandments as the big, bad list of "what not to do." As I was reading this week what people think about the ten commandments, I found every opinion out there. Some people think they are basic rules for living, other people can't imagine that God would be so hard as to give a list of things *not* to do. And some people just seem them as a list of possible rules to break. But what almost everyone has in common is that the ten commandments is something like a set of house rules--a list of thing that you shouldn't do. But actually, even though the ten commandments are often phrased in the negative--"you shall not"--each of them has a positive aspect that tells us what we should be doing. Throughout Christian history, and particularly in the Reformed tradition that Presbyterians are a part of, people have looked to the Ten Commandments for the positive instructions they give us for how to live our lives. So today we're going to look at the first commandment, and this series will continue until Palm Sunday.

Now before we get to the commandments, we have to look quickly at what is called the "prologue" to the commandments, or the introduction. You may be one of those--like me--who often skips the introduction to books and dives right into chapter one. But in this case the introduction is very important. It says, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt." This is the way that God identifies himself over and over again in the Old Testament; God is the one who brought Israel out of Egypt. Now why does God say this? Well, imagine that a mother tells her young son that he needs to listen to what she says. The son says, "No, I don't." The mother responds, "I carried you for nine months; I gave birth to you; I am your mother. You will listen to me." Well, that's similar to what God is saying when he says, I brought you out of the land of Egypt. He's saying, "I saw you when you were in distress, I rescued you, I am your God. Now this is what you must do." God is identifying the relationship that he has with this people--and it's on the basis of this relationship that all the other commandments are made.

This is important for us because it's on the basis of our relationship with God that these commandments are positive and life-giving in our lives. If we have no relationship with God, and we hear these commandments, it can absolutely sound like so many more burdens loaded on our shoulders, a big bad list of ten things not to do. But if we do have a

relationship with God, then this list takes on the character of life-giving instructions. For the Israelites, it was the reality of being rescued, or being completely dependent on God for their lives, that prepared them to receive the commandments. In the same way, for us it is our experience of being rescued, of being saved by God, of being dependent on God for our forgiveness and healing, for our lives, that prepares us to hear God's instructions for our lives. So the foundation of all of these instructions is a relationship with God. And that is the foundation of the art of living well, it's the foundation of any life that is fulfilling and satisfying at the deepest level--a relationship with the God who created us and in whose image we are made. Any lasting happiness, any fulfillment that you and I will have will be based on that deep foundation.

And it so makes sense in light of that relationship that the first commandment is "You shall have no other gods besides me." In the ancient world in which the Israelite lived, many people worshipped many different gods; for instance the Egyptians, who had enslaved the Israelites, had the gods of sun and desert and justice and the dead and cats. Gods for harvest and gods for fertility and gods for protection; and people worshipped these gods all at the same time. Of course the Israelites had lived in Egypt for 400 years, and they knew about all of these gods, and in this context the commandment is given that, "you shall have no other gods besides me." The word here for 'besides' can be translated different ways. Sometimes it reads, 'before' me, and sometimes 'alongside' me, and sometimes, 'behind me.' And the reason that it is difficult to translate that word is that it actually means all of that. God is saying, "You shall have no other gods beside me, behind me, before me, above me, or below me." To put this in positive language, God is saying, "You shall have only me as your God." What does it mean to have a god? And how do we have only one?

Well, what or whom do we place our trust in, and trust our lives with? What do we hold on to with all our hearts, no matter what? Because what we trust in and hold on to, that is the god that we "have." It is possible for you and me to recognize that there is indeed a god, it is possible for you and me to even believe that god exists. And for many of us on the journey of faith, this is one of the first steps--to acknowledge that there is a god and to believe in that god. But it is something else entirely for us to 'have' that god: to trust that god with our lives; to cling to that God with our whole hearts, no matter what comes our way. The foundation of living well, the basic foundation a good life, is not simply to believe in God but to "have" God--to trust God with our whole lives.

In the story that I read from the book of Exodus, the Israelites were tested to see which they would really have. They had just been rescued from slavery in Egypt, and were in a part of the wilderness called Sin; even though that word looks like our word for "sin", it's related to the peninsula we know as Sinai. Since they were in the desert, there was obviously no water and they were very thirsty. So thirsty in fact, that they were threatening to become an angry mob, and Moses even thought they might stone him. They started to complain against him, saying, "Why did you bring us out here? To die? At least in Egypt, we might have been slaves, but we had food and water. We weren't going to die!" So Moses began to pray, asking God what he should do with these faithless people--because he really thought they might just kill him and head back to Egypt.

Now this moment is not only a national crisis for Israel, it is a crisis for their faith. The bible describes this as a test of Israel's faith; Moses named the place Massah because Is-

raels tested God there. And in Psalm 81, the Lord says, "At Massah I tested your faith." This is the place where Israel tested God and God tested them. It was a test because they faced the question of which God they would be ultimately loyal to? Would they be loyal to the God who rescued them from Egypt and brought out into this desert? Or would they be loyal to the those who provided food and water for them in Egypt? Who would they be loyal to? Who would they cling to and trust with their lives? Would it be the god who rescued them from Egypt? Or would it be the Egyptians who gave them food and water?

This past weekend, Caitlin and I went down to North Carolina for a baby shower. And I was thinking about this message as we boarded the plane and sat down. Now, I know that airplanes can fly, and I've seen them fly and flown on them. And I remember learning about Bernoulli's principle, and basic aerodynamics, particularly the shape of the wing, that makes it possible for an airplane to stay in the air. But knowing all of that is different from sitting in the plane suspended above the earth. As we were descending into Philadelphia yesterday, I thought: I have put my whole life into the care of the designers, and mechanics, and pilots of this airplane. I am trusting them completely. That is what God asks of us: to not only know of God, but to have God; to not simply believe in God, but to trust God with our whole lives. To trust that in weakness, God is the source of strength; in anguish God is our comfort; in confusion, God is wisdom; in danger, God is refuge; in every circumstance and situation, God is our hope. This is the foundation for living life well: to have God--to trust God completely with our whole lives.

And not only that, but to trust God and God alone. This is what the story of Israel's thirst in the desert is really getting to--having only *one* god. Those thirsty folks in the desert were perfectly happy to have the god Yahweh when it came time to be rescued from Egypt; having the Lord as their god was not the problem. But when they were thirsty, they were also happy to have the gods of the Egyptians, if that would get them water. It was not having god that was their problem; it was having god and god alone, forever and always their only God that was their problem. This was their test of faith in the wilderness. It was to see if they would continue to cling to the god that rescued them from Egypt, even when they were thirsty and unsure that God was there.

For many of us too, this is where the challenge comes, and this is the point where we can grow in the art of living well. Just like the Israelites, we trust God with our lives when things are tough and God is standing ready to rescue us and help us. We don't have a problem trusting God and clinging to God--sometimes. But in other times, we look elsewhere. We wander off in search of a more effective god, of a better solution to life's problem. Sometimes what happened to the Israelites happens to us: we pray and we hope and nothing gets better, and it seems like God isn't coming through. In our desperation, we do what they did; we say, "Well, this isn't working for me, so maybe I should go and try my luck in Egypt." Where is Egypt? Well, Egypt takes a hundred forms or more. Sometimes it's relaxation; sometimes it's exercise; perhaps it's money, and maybe it's work; for some it's family, or perhaps a new relationship. In any of these, we look and think--maybe the answer is over there. Maybe if I give that all my attention, and devote myself there, then life will be better for me.

Of course, we don't give our whole lives to these other gods; we don't actually worship them--but we try them out. And that's our problem. It's that we have complete loyalty

to another god; it's that we don't have loyalty to the One god. The Bible describes it this way--saying that we "go off after" other gods. That's the way my father used to describe it if me or my brothers were spending lots of time on the phone with different girls, or always out at someone else's house. We were "going off after" a girl. Well, going off after a god is sort of like that. It's more like flirting than marriage. And it's this holy wanderlust that God is challenging--for the Israelites in the desert, and for us in Frenchtown. The most basic instruction of scripture is that steadfast loyalty to the One true God is the foundation of a happy life.

Recently, I've been reading the story of the building of the Brooklyn Bridge. That bridge, with its enormous towers and suspension lines arching over the East River, is an impressive sight. But what is more impressive, I've learned, is what is below the water. The most work and innovation and danger was in sinking the foundations, called caissons, into the river. They were the size of five tennis courts, and over 30 feet high; they had to be sunk into the river bed, forty feet on one side and seventy-eight feet on the other. It was painstaking work that took years; but the chief engineer said that it had to be done right, and no expense spared--because if the foundation wasn't solid everything else would come apart.

If the foundation isn't solid, everything else will come apart. In the face of multiple pulls on our lives, and many demands on our loyalties, the core cannot hold. But when our ultimate loyalty is solid and non-negotiable, when their competition for final allegiance, then everything becomes secondary--and manageable. Life, with all its competing demands and various claims, is possible--but the foundation is there. Steadfast loyalty to God is our secure foundation for human life, and in that sense it's not just an instruction but it's a gift.

In the movie *City Slickers*, when Curly asks Mitch, "You know what the secret of life is?", Mitch replies "No, what?" "This.", Curly says, holding up his finger. "Your finger?" Mitch asks? Curly says, "One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and everything else don't mean nothing." "That's great," Mitch says, "but what's the one thing?" Curly answers, "That's what you've got to figure out." God has told us the one thing--the secret of life--to stick to him matter what.

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January 17th, 2010*