

I. Introduction

A. A few months ago, in The Friday Update – an email I send out with book and article recommendations, quotes, special prayers and prayer requests, that kind of thing. I am not cool enough to Tweet, so I save up stuff for an email once a week). Anyway, a few months ago, I sent out a list of questions I'd been collecting for a while that I thought were important. These are not the ultimate questions: What ultimately matters? Who am I? Where did I come from? What is expected of me? What happens to me when I die? How do I know what I know? But they are big questions. I think they identify the issues that will shape the next ten years:

1. Will the US embrace a principled pluralism – i.e., will we find ways to peacefully co-exist or will the culture wars escalate? At the moment, the left is moving further left and the right is moving further right, and both sides are acting as if this is a winner take all contest. Can the center hold, and if it doesn't, what happens next?
2. Will moderate Muslims regain control of Islam, or will the world's second largest religion be defined by the radicals? And if it's the latter, how do we avoid the "clash of civilizations" Samuel Huntington forecasted?
3. What is the future of the church? The mainline church has been in decline for decades. In recent years, evangelicals have lost favor in the West, but the church in Africa, Asia and Latin America is exploding. How does what is happening over there affect here? How does the church here navigate the present moment? Who emerges to shape the next ten years?
4. What is happening with our climate? I've avoided reading much about climate change because the answers are shaped more by politics than science, and because I do not understand the science. But changes in our weather are having consequences, and some think devastating consequences are coming. What happens with our weather and what should be done?
5. How will local, state, national and international governments deal with growing debt levels? To make this more personal, how will Illinois deal with the dark storm clouds of unfunded pension commitments?
6. What happens to those whose jobs are eliminated by Artificial Intelligence? I've read Utopian and Dystopian scenarios about my life once machines are smarter than I am. Which is it?
7. Where does the sexual revolution go next? What happens to marriage? The family? To what extent will sexual expression continue to drive identity? How much will gender fluidity become mainstream?
8. Can everyone keep their hands off the button? Nine countries have nukes. Others will almost certainly join that list. Will all those who have them be able to avoid using them, or will our planet be visited by colossal destruction?

B. I noted that there are other questions that deserve honorable mention – i.e., Are we entering a new cold war with Russia? When will Jesus return? Will block chain live up to its hype? Is higher education going to straighten itself out?, etc. – but these were

my eight. I suggested that if could answer these questions, we'd know how the next ten years will unfold.

C. I have a different question that is every bit as big? What if we loved God first? What if we passionately and actively loved and honored God? What if we really trusted Him? If we fully leaned into the Ten Commandments? What would the world look like if we embraced His counsel? And for starters, let me ask that about the first of the Ten Commandments – which is the basis for all that follow: What would happen if our lives were rightly ordered, if our heart, if our loves were aligned as they should be? What would happen if the God was our god.

II. Last week I set things up by noting that:

A. Although many think it's crazy to reach back 3,500 years – to a list of ancient rules that they think of as heavy-handed and outdated – that the Ten Commandments are a gift. They are divine insight into the way the world actually works.

B. I noted that there are two big narratives in play – scientific secularism and generic spirituality, which disagree on most things but unite in claiming that there is no universal morality. There are no rules other than be true to yourself and your feelings. In contrast to that, the Bible teaches: that God defines reality. It argues that: there is a God and there are rules that come out of his character. The Ten Commandments are not a list of His preferences - they are not in any sense random or arbitrary. They emerge out of who He is and they are hardwired into the world He created. Consequently, we should think of them less as prescriptions to follow and more as descriptions of how the world works. And it's not very accurate to say that we break the Ten Commandments as much as it is to note that we break ourselves against the Ten Commandments.

C. I argued that the Ten Commandments are a gift from God who loves you and wants you to thrive. They are a light for the path. They help us know how to live a life that works.

III. There are other things it might be good to know about the Ten Commandments:

A. Since a number of you worked to memorize them, you should be aware that there is some disagreement over the numbering. Not the content or even the order, but it turns out that Jews, Catholics and Protestants disagree over how to break them apart, and some of it all depends on what we do right here. I am not going to drag you into this debate. I am noting it only so, if you have a list of the commandments on a plaque or bookmark, and it seems a bit different, that is why.

B. You should know that neither the Bible in general or the Ten Commandments in particular set out to prove that God exists, they assume He does.

C. And I want to remind you that there is a grand positive behind all ten, such as in the first commandment, where we learn that there is a God. We are not alone in the universe. There is a holy, righteous, loving, merciful, just creator who wants a relationship with you.¹

IV. There are other things we might focus on given the fact that the Ten Commandments serve as the foundation of much of Western Culture. But today we start down the list itself. We turn to Commandment Number One:

A. Exodus 20 reads: And God spoke all these words: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. “You shall have no other gods before me.”

B. My plan is that every week I would also cite a New Testament passage that expands on what we find in Exodus or Deuteronomy. Today that will be Romans 1: 18 – 24 – which is the classic New Testament passage about false gods.

V. But before we turn there, let me note three things that emerge from a study of Exodus 20:1.

A. First, the first commandment needs to be first. I’m not sure the order of the other commandments is important – as I noted last week, they break out in two tables, with the first four focused on our relationship to God and the next six focused on our relationship with each other. There is order, but I’m not sure it has to be exactly what it is. I suspect you could scramble numbers 7 – 10 without doing too much harm to anything. But the first commandment needs to be first.² We have to start where we start because everything grows out of God being God. He is the Creator. He is the owner. He makes the rules. No other cultures brings everything – spiritual, physical, moral, relational, everything! – back to God in quite the same way.

B. It’s worth noting that this is unique. If you look at other lists – the eightfold path of Buddhism, the Egyptian code of Ma’at, the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi – you see that they generally start with not killing.³

C. It’s also worth noting that no other ancient culture had a law that said you couldn’t worship other gods. This made the Jews unique. It also made them unpopular. Because it’s not a very friendly claim. It isn’t now, and it wasn’t then.

1. Think about it. Imagine you’re moving into a new neighborhood – that is what the Jews were about to do – leave Egypt and settle down in Israel.

2. Imagine you’re moving into a new neighborhood and on that first day when the moving truck is out front unpacking your stuff, imagine that some of your new neighbors stroll over with a plate of cinnamon rolls and say hello and ask if there is any way they can help.

3. And they see your car and one of them says, “Hey, that’s a nice car. We’ve never seen a car like that. We drive something different. And they point to their car, sitting in the driveway across the street.” And then they add, “If you need to borrow our car or anything else while you’re getting settled just let us know.”

4. That’s a nice offer. A friendly gesture. And you are expected to say something friendly like, “Wow, thanks so much.”

5. What you are not expected to say is something like: My car is better than your car. That’s sort of a conversation stopper. Not a great way to start a friendship.

6. And it would be even less friendly to say something like, “Well, the truth is, my car is the very best car there is, and in fact, it’s the only real car ever made. Yours is just fake.” At that point they are probably going to take their cinnamon rolls and go home.

7. If you have problems with that analogy -- and trust me, there are lots of problems with that analogy. Let's change it. And instead of cars you are going to talk about schools. The neighbors come over and say, "We see you have children. We have children and they study at such and such a school."

8. And you respond – that's not a school. The whole educational philosophy there is wrong. It's nonsense. Worse than that, it's based on a lie and ultimately harmful."

9. Well, that's a harsh statement. That is way over the line. It's rude and offensive and wrong. Unless.... unless it's true. And then it still may be rude and inappropriate, depending on how it's delivered – depending on the motivation and the spirit and tone of the comment. But quite possibly that comment might be very loving.

10. Please understand, what God does here in this first commandment is make a very bold and a very exclusive truth claim.

11. He says, "I am God and there are no others."

D. The first commandment is a demand for exclusive worship.

1. A literal translation of the first commandment would read something like: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other Gods before my face. Or, no other gods in my sight.

2. The prohibition isn't against allowing other gods to be more important than YHWH. The Lord isn't saying that among the pantheon of gods he wants to be first, but rather, He is saying, there is no pantheon of gods. He alone is God. And He demands to be god.

E. Please note that Jesus affirms all of this. When he is asked, "What is the greatest commandment? He paraphrases this. He says, "love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength."

VI. Let's turn to Romans 1:18-24. READ. I have four points.

VII. Number One: You have a god.

A. Some of you are thinking, "not me. I'm an atheist," or "I'm an agnostic." Sorry, we all have a God. That's the message of Romans 1.

1. We either worship God or we have exchanged the truth about God for a lie and we worship something else. Those are the options.
 2. If you want to swap out what Paul said for one of the more popular 20th century theologians, Bob Dylan, “you got to serve somebody.”
 3. The question is not, do you believe in God, but what god do you believe in. Or, who or what do you worship?
- B. The Bible never tells us to worship. It assumes we admire, desire, pursue, and serve someone or something.
- C. What the Bible commands is that we worship the one true god.
- D. We all worship. We are wired to worship. Our worship may not sound like it was taken from the book of Psalms, but if you listen for it, you hear it all the time.
1. He is the greatest quarterback to ever play the game.
 2. Did you see her in that movie? She is divine.
 3. This car is the most amazing machine made by man.
 4. I couldn't live without my cell phone.
- E. What we see when we look is people declaring the glory of things all the time. Ascribing their worth – which is where we get the word.
1. Worship is a contraction of “worth – ship”
 2. It implies expressing something's worth by our thoughts, words and actions.
- F. We worship because we can't help ourselves.
- G. What we actually see is people singing the praises of people or things and then expecting those things to deliver meaning and value that they can't deliver. What we see are people hoping that a person or a thing is going to complete their life, provide joy, bring value.
- H. What you see is people expecting that a car or a boat is going to make them happy.
- I. The question is never will we worship. It's what will we worship. The question is not, do you have a god, but what is your god? Or, is The God your god? Are you worshipping the God who is God, or something else – something less.

VIII. Two: Your God shapes You.

- A. In fact, what we think about God is the most important thing about us. More than anything else, our god shapes us. We become like our god. We are shaped by what we love and worship.
- B. Augustine wrote about this when he spoke about our need to order our loves.

C. This is part of the reason why the first commandment has to be first. What goes first place in our life impacts everything else. To be wrong here is to be wrong everywhere.

D. And this is the reason God is so adamant that we worship Him.

1. It's important that we understand, that as much as God delights in our worship, He doesn't need it.

2. C.S. Lewis writes about this in his commentary on the Psalms. He was initially very offended. He thought less of God because God commands us to worship God. And that seems pretty small.

3. Think about it. What if I commanded you to say that I was wonderful. It wouldn't make you think I was wonderful, it would make you think I was needy, desperate.

4. But God doesn't need our worship. He delights in it. It brings joy, but He has no need. He knows that we do. If we order our life and our loves around something other than God, we're sunk.

E. The first commandment isn't for God's benefit, it's for ours. Because what we think about God is the single most important thing that we think.

F. God demands our allegiance for our own good. *He doesn't need to be first. God doesn't need. He is perfect and complete and lacks nothing. But He loves us and He made us for himself and He wants to be close to us like parents love being close to their children. He desires closeness to us, but He doesn't need it. We do. We are less and we are lost without him.*

G. We will see more about the fact that God demands to be first next week. It becomes clear that we worship God rightly – that we think about him accurately. There is some overlap between the first and second commandments. The first demands that we worship God; Commandment two demands that we worship him the right way. Let's stay on One for now.

H. The idea that God will be who God will be – and not who we want him to be or think him to be – is big. He defines himself.

I. Everything flows from the idea that the God who is god is our god.⁴

J. No people or nation ever rises above their idea of God. We move toward our mental image of who or what God is. We become like him or her or it. We order our lives to reflect our god.

IX. Three: You may not know who your God is.

A. One: You have a god; 2) This God shapes you; now 3) You may not know who you are ultimately worshipping. I say this in part because I am coming to realize that we often do not understand ourselves very well. It's a chilling thought. There are times when it's obvious that everyone in the room knows something about a person, except that person! It makes me wonder what everyone knows about me, but me!

- B. I also say this because it's common for us to try to use God to get what we want, and not realize, what we want is really what we are worshipping.
- C. Story about woman in seeker study – God has been a big disappointment.
- D. When someone says, "I tried God but He didn't deliver. I didn't get the promotion. I got sick. I am still single or still in a challenging marriage or whatever."
- E. Men and women, God demands to be God. We need to realize, He doesn't exist for our benefit, we exist for his.
- F. This is a big deal that many do not get. It hit me years after coming to faith. It was more of a conversion experience than my conversion. Wow, this changes everything.
- G. Who or what are you really worshipping. There is a question to talk about in your small group. There is a question to launch a conversation. Who or what is my god?
- X. Four: You need to know and honor God.
- A. In fact, a big part of spiritual growth is coming to a greater understanding of who God is.
- B. We tend to project – as we do in marriage. We think we know who we have married, but we're wrong.
- C. We need to know who God is because:
1. The more we know the easier He is to love. He is bigger and better and more amazing. It can be unsettling. Because we tend to make him safe and smaller than He is, so we can be unsettled when we see how big He is. But He is easier to worship and lining up behind him makes a lot more sense.
 2. And we need to know Him because, small deviations lead to big problems over time.
- XI. So the question becomes: Who is your god?
- A. You say, "well, my God is the god of the Bible." Maybe, but we bring a lot of baggage and we keep changing him.
- B. I'm not asking who your god should be. I'm not asking who you came to worship this morning. I am asking, who did you worship this week?
1. Where did you spend your time and your money? What does your credit card statement and your calendar say?
 2. Who did you try to impress?
 3. What shaped your values and actions?
 4. What did you think about or talk about the most? What did you get most excited about this week?

5. What did you dream about? If you woke up in the middle of the night, who or what immediately came to mind?
6. Maybe it's your job, or it's a hobby or it's money – but be careful with your answer because it's very possibly your god.
7. Hey, it might not be anything bad - this item or person or thing that has first place in your life. In fact, if I were a betting man, I'd wager the farm that it's not some Egyptian deity that is demanding your first born in sacrifice.
8. It's probably something good – at worst something essentially neutral.
9. But if the good replaces the best, then the first commandment has been broken

XII. What if we loved God first? What if we made The God Our God? What if we kept the first commandment?

- A. For some of you, that means embracing God for the first time. Next week we will look at more of who He is. In a commandment that outlaws idols we see that the perfect image of God is Jesus.
- B. For some of you, the next step is to realize that you thought you were heading down the right path, but you have been simply trying to use God to get other things.
- C. Prayer, reflection and discussion lie ahead of all of us. The conversations are just beginning.

¹ The fact that God meets with Moses and gives him the commandments reinforces the idea that He is personal and loving. There are certain aspects of our relationship with God that are described in legal terms – but in order to rightly understand the relationship we need to see all of the personal terms that are used. He is our Father. We get adopted into his family. In Hosea he'll use the language of marriage. God does not lead with a doctrine or ideology – He is not an idea or an unmoved mover, but a loving father.

² It's not that hard to imagine commandments six through ten being in a different order. Last week I noted that they break out four and six. The first four deal with our vertical relationship with God and the next six are more horizontal in nature – they focus on how we should treat each other. We can imagine scrambling the second tablet.

³ If the Ten Commandments were like other ancient codes of law you would expect them to start with, “do not steal” or “do not lie,” or something like that. You would think that it would start with something about how we are going to relate to each other. After all, that is how all of the other codes start – the All of the other codes regulate a whole range of outward behavior – from purchasing property to settling disputes. They do not mention any moral obligation to God. Timothy Tennent, *The First Commandment: You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me*.

⁴ The first commandment is the foundation for our keeping of the whole of the Ten Commandments. It is the most basic reorientation from a life directed toward ourselves to a life directed toward God. Therefore, we should view this first commandment as the doorway into the whole life of faith. It sets our feet on the right path and orients us in the right direction for all that follows. Tennent.