

The ten commandments, ever since God etched them in stone three thousand years ago, have laid a foundation for moral behavior. Every Jewish and Christian child has read them, studied them, and memorized them in order and by number. Even Jesus knew the commandments. When the rich young man in Mark's Gospel asked him what to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus quotes from the ten commandments. Today it amuses me that not only did Jesus omit a few, he confused the order of the ones he got right. Jesus would never have passed the semester exam in my fourth grade religion class. When I was in grade school I had a twelve-inch ruler with the commandments printed 5 on each side. We never measured a line without the reminder of how our lives were measured.

In learning the commandments it didn't take long to figure out that some were harder to keep than others. As kids, most of us knew we could easily slip on four, seven, and eight--we disobeyed our parents, we stole, and we lied. But other commandments were a snap. Number one, for example--"Thou shalt not have other gods." No problem. People worshipped other gods in pagan temples. We didn't have any of those in our neighborhood. I didn't think I was breaking the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," but no one ever explained that one to me very well. "Worry about that when you're an adult," my fourth grade teacher said, and most of us have been worried about it ever since. To this day it's not uncommon to hear penitents in the confessional finishing their list of sins with the phrase, "Forgive me for these and all the sins of my past life, especially for breaking the sixth commandment," as if that one is the most important of them all.

But which one of the ten is the most important of them all? This might surprise you, but I'd say, very clearly, it's number one. It's the longest of the ten, the only one God explains in detail: "I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery. You shall not have other gods besides me." We're familiar with the false gods in our lives--money, sex, power, ourselves. In a way, the other nine commandments are all descriptions of the first, they explain the false gods that keep us from desiring the one God. Lying, envy, disrespect--these are behaviors of people who have turned away from the one God to pursue another.

Other people can be false gods to us. Many times we act in a way not to please God but to please someone else--our parents, a spouse, children, an employer, a priest. Many people place demands on our behavior, and we often do what they want, even against our better judgment. But we don't have to please other people. We have to please God and God alone. Jesus himself in a classic story from His childhood told Mary and Joseph he had to do his Father's business. And the night before he died he wanted the cup to pass from him, but he prayed that God's will be done. In the ultimate act of self-denial, Jesus needed approval from no one--not even from himself--he needed approval from no one but God alone.

If the ten commandments teach us anything, let it be the importance of the first, and let us decide to follow the one God before whom there is no other.