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First Things First

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Exodus 20: 1 – 3

If I'm honest, and we're talking about first things first, I should say the first thing in my life is I sometimes find myself going crazy. Maybe it's because *eventually* I discover all the stuff I put first in my life isn't holding up in these times. Maybe you're there too. It's like the perfect storm we're experiencing in the banking crisis. As we're finding out, there are policies of first importance that we can't ignore, even in the good times, because life was designed that way. If you're tired of the gap between how you spend your time and what's deeply important, I have good news. No matter how important we think we are, no matter how much we've ignored those policies ourselves, we can go back (again!) to the Source of life to discover (again!) what those policies and truths are, apart from an act of congress! ☺ Over the next several weeks, we're going to look at putting first things first.

In some ways, this kick off sermon is a follow up to last January, when we preached on putting away childish things. One thing we looked at was how God by His Spirit wants to heal the wounds from our childhood pasts. **Such scars have been buried in pain for so long that they are causing many of us to act out of our hurt in ways that only hurt us more.** Last January, as an act of worship, people brought forward pieces of paper with the wounds they were offering up for Jesus to heal. As I read the anonymous list of what people gave over to God later that day, I read wounds like: "Mom's abuse, Dad's abandonment and praise; Always being right; Feelings of being unwanted; Father's drinking, misunderstanding my sister; Not being good enough; Food and drink dependence; Selfish pride; Rejection; Brother's constant meanness to me how this affected my self-worth; Abandonment, self-centeredness; Anxieties, thought my parents didn't want me. I wasn't loved; My need to be recognized, need for praise; "You will never amount to anything", Loneliness, measurement; being judged at an unattainable level; when my father stopped coming to visit us; my father not giving me any praise only my brothers, low self esteem." And something happened: God placed this thought on my heart—"There is a serious lack of praise in the world, and we don't even realize the damage we're causing."

The damage comes because of how we were created: When we're starved for praise, we look for substitutes: substitutes for praise, and substitutes to give our praise to. When we look for substitutes *for* praise, most of the time, in our emaciated state, our substitutes for God-centered praise take the form of pain management or instant gratification. That's the best we can come up with.

When you experience a lack of praise, it is very painful. You want distraction. You want to avoid dealing with it. So you look for bad stuff that feels good. And there are so many choices today. And another thing about these substitutes for praise in our lives: they make it an awful lot easier to be drawn into substitutes to praise. And anything we praise above or beyond God—whom we were created to praise, creates havoc in our lives.

God must have know this, because His first Word to His people was this in Exodus 20:1 "*God spoke all these words, saying "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me."* Do you know what that is? The 1st of 10. And I'm not talking yardage. ☺ I'm talking commandments. The first commandment: "No other gods before me." No

other gods... In other words, God implies you'll wreck your lives, you'll live "off-center," and your wreck your relationship with Me if we have them. Now, those of us who grew up in church with our kids' picture Bible have this picture in our brains of an angry old dude (pose as Moses) up on a hill throwing this tombstone looking thing down on people around this little statue of a cow, and we tend to relegate this "no other gods" commandment to little idols or golden calves. But look at all the stuff we praise...all the stuff we put before God, starting with "me, myself, and I." (The unholy trinity). We wind up loving things and using people, not the other way around. We have to realize idols today can look like ideas, or hobbies, or those things we say "are just a part of who I am."

How much damage are you *carrying around* because you don't first praise God? And how much damage are you *causing around you* because you don't praise?... The wild thing is you can test it. You can evaluate yourself. Proverbs 27:21 says "***The crucible is for silver and the furnace for gold, and a man is tested by the praise accorded him.***"

This proverb is also a Hebrew riddle. The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold test purity and genuineness by heating up the precious metal. The heating up process separates out the impurities. It's interesting that it is *the testing itself* which also purifies it. Testing authenticates it. But what does the second line mean? "A person is tested by the praise accorded him or her." Possibilities:

You're tested and known by how you are praised: your reputation. Like your references: "Could you give us the names of a few other people who know this candidate?" The less you know a person, the more you think in terms of position. But the more you get to know someone, the more you think person rather than position. For example, if I say my dad, Jay Hook, some people will say "former major league pitcher." Those who know *more* might say "First Mets win." But those who *really* know him would know that baseball is such a small part of who he is. Those who know him would tell you the great things he's done since baseball as a *person*- a dad, a grandpa, a great guy, a leader, a churchman for the United Methodist Church, or a Christ follower seeking to help other people. In life, you make a reputation, and then your reputation makes you. You're tested and known by how you are praised. Another possibility...

You're tested by the way that you praise, by how you praise. This goes back to the childhood wounds. *Sadly enough, many people cannot bring themselves to praise.* Many don't have the spiritual capacity because they don't put God near any first things first. Some fathers instinctively can't praise their sons. ("You're special. I'm so glad that out of all the dads in the world, I get to be your dad. I don't care if you ever get on a team or bring home good grades.")

- You have to give them 10 "Attaboys" before you give them 1 "You jerk".
- You gotta get on their team before you get on their back.
- Leaders have to catch people doing something *right* far more often than doing something *wrong*. Listen, if you can't give genuine appreciation, you shouldn't be a parent or a leader.
- If you're carrying around wounds from this lack of praise, know that those wounds say a lot less about *you* than they say about the spiritual capacity of those *around* you who are incapable of praise. And you can give those wounds over to Jesus today.
- At least once each day, I will try to express a word of genuine appreciation to people around me. (To people who had just done something or been something.) You can do this to a flight attendant or at a restaurant. Remember—people are starved for praise.
- I thought doing this I would be a blessing to the human race; but I discovered that *it* did something for *me*, and my life would be much more drab and dull if I didn't do this.
- It's amazing how praise changes your life. Won't you make this one of the first things you do?

Another possible meaning to the riddle is this: **You are purified by what you praise.** Just like the silver in the crucible. You are tested and purified by the object you praise. Many social scientists are very concerned about kids' heroes today. If you were to go to a 5th grade class and ask them to show you the person they most honor, they can tell by that symptom what the kids' ideals are and the kind of person they want to be. You're tested by what you praise. After I while I get really tired of my idols. They can't last. And they "purify" me in a way that eventually I don't like.

Tell me what you do when you don't have anything else to do. Who are you when no one's looking. Check

out your TV, or the websites you visit, or the record in your check book. You want to talk about idols? And listen to what the Psalmist writes in Psalm 115:1-4, 8: *“Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to Your name be the glory (or fame), because of Your love and faithfulness. 2 Why do the nations say, “Where is their God?” 3 Our God is in heaven; He does whatever pleases Him. 4 But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men (Then he describes their idols). 8 Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.”* It’s that last line that is so haunting: Those idols you make? Those idols you fall for? You will become like them, and so will all those who trust in them.

Actually in the act of praise is a kind of purification. Professor Haddon Robinson talks about being alone in this big house. He said it was so big a kid could run away and never leave home. (Part of the perfect storm?) Haddon was watching a baseball game. It was the last inning. The White Sox were one run ahead. The other team got 2 men on and nobody out. And then he saw an unassisted triple play. He said “I jumped up, and there was nobody there to cheer.” There is something about expressing praise that fulfills it and sharing it completes us as human beings. **We need to praise.** Have you ever wondered why the Bible calls on us to praise him? Is it because God is the supreme ego? No. God is perfect and complete, with or without our praise. We don’t praise because God needs our praise, but because first things first, we need to praise.

This week, think of what that means, to praise God. To applaud God. Take one attribute of God’s, and praise God for that attribute all morning. Like grace, or holiness or purity. Praise him for his goodness and generosity. If I were God, I’d only bring the rain to the just and let the unjust dry up. But not God. Praise Him for that! When you put first things first by praising God, you take on God’s ways. The living God! Not some idol that will starve you and the people around you. That’s why the Bible says it’s good to praise the Lord! And look for ways to give genuine appreciation to people around you, whether at home or the grocery store. Imagine if we got it right, and put first things first: No other gods. In a positive spin, no other gods in our lives means we’re getting lined up with the Lord of all life: Yes, God! Yes Lord! You are enough! You are our God—all sufficient, just, merciful, loving, healing, faithful, patient, grace filled, and worthy of all our praise! Amen!

Study Guide

Monday: Reread your sermon notes from yesterday. As you read Exodus 20:1-3, make a mental list of all the little gods with which you have been filling yourself, offer them to God, and begin praising the One true God.

Tuesday: Read Psalms 69:30-34. Read Psalm 96. Read Psalm 112. These are several among many psalms that call us to praise the Lord. In his book on the Psalms, C. S. Lewis writes that “except in extreme cases, prayer seems to be inner health made audible.” Now begin praising God. Name God’s attributes, and see if you can improve your praising of God? Try praising God through the alphabet. Get creative and celebrate God for who He is.

Wednesday: Read Revelation 1:17-18 and 22:13. This is John writing near the end of his life. These passages are well-known. In them Jesus is revealing Himself to John. What does it mean when Christ says “I am the First and the Last”? Could you make Jesus Christ your first thought and your last thought of each part of your day? Each interaction? Could you begin and end each moment with thoughts of Him?

Thursday: Read Isaiah 44. Read vs. 1-8. In this passage, Isaiah speaks God’s words, reminding the people of Israel that they were formed by God Himself. Note that Isaiah prophesies in verse 8 “Do not tremble, do not be afraid.” Many find that when God is first in life, they can see themselves and their lives as a part of God’s greater story and His abundant life; but they only find this when they put “first things first.” Now read vs. 9-20. This is a devastating attack on idolatry, and the insane practice of it. Do you have ideas that you cling to that are idolatrous? Now read vs. 21-28. God reminds Israel of His great forgiveness and ultimate claim on our lives. Ask God to show you how your story fits in to God’s story, and take time to praise the true, living God.

Friday: Read Matthew 5:1-16. This is the beginning of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Read vs. 1-12. These are the Beatitudes, describing the inner condition of a Christ follower and the blessings, or happiness that Jesus promises as a result. Now read vs. 13-16. Pay close attention to verse 16. Ask God to show you who lacks praise in their life. Reach out to them by a phone call or a visit, and praise God for them, that they may see your good works and praise your Father in heaven.