

8<sup>th</sup> Sun. after Pent.  
August 7, 2011

Who's Number 1?

Pastor Michael Ewart  
Exodus 32:15-29

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

“Who’s number 1?” That is an ever-fascinating question, and we’re always interested in the answer. What is your favorite sport? Don’t you want to know “Who’s number 1?” During Husker football season, fans can tell you every week who’s rated number one... including the number one ranked in the AP, coaches poll or BCS standings. If baseball is your sport, you probably know who’s ranked number one. And even if you can’t site the number one ranking team at some point during the season, you are *very* interested in who is ranked number one when the season ends. You’ll watch the bowl games, the final four, or whatever championship game determines who is number one.

But our fascination with number one is not isolated to sports. If I asked you, “Which country is number one in quality of health care?” You’d be interested in the answer, right? (Hint: Not the U.S.... not even close. We’re 37<sup>th</sup>. France is number one.

Who has the number one largest economy? Okay, here we’re number one. In fact, our economy is still over twice the size of China’s.

We’re so fascinated with who’s number one, that we have a score keeper called “The Guinness Book of World Records.” They can tell you in thousands of categories who is officially number one.

But today, my prayer is that you will be absolutely fascinated and engaged in this same question: “Who’s number one?” But we’ll address it to the spiritual. I want you to want to answer that question when it comes to your heart and to your life. Who in your current existence is number one?

To help us answer that question let’s take a look at a people that first had God as number one... and then didn’t. We want to evaluate what happened and why, and then see if there’s something here that will help us evaluate who’s number one in our heart, and why this question is so vitally important.

I want to read to you a portion from the book of Exodus. Before I read it, let me give you the context and setting so we understand better what’s happening. It’s about 1500 years before Jesus Christ was born. God’s people Israel had been enslaved in Egypt. God sent 10 plagues on the Egyptians to convince Pharaoh to let God’s people God. He finally did. The people now travel to a particular mountain called Mt. Sinai. And at this mountain, God is going to do something amazing for his people. He’s going to reveal to them his holy will that would govern their daily lives.

If you love your children, you are very clear with them what you expect, what they may and may not do. You also outline that there will be consequences if they do not obey. You do this again because you love them. They know exactly what you expect. You give the rules because you have a relationship with your children, right? You do not and you cannot set down rules and expectations for your neighbor’s kids... or even relatives’. You don’t have the right. They’re not yours. In fact, the parents will get mad if you try to interfere in that way. You give

rules to your own kids because you want them to become responsible, secure, caring adults. So also, God wants to nurture his people Israel. So he doesn't want them to be in the dark about his will for them and their lives. So he brings them to this mountain and tells them that he will now spell it all out for them what it means to be the children of the most high God.

And the people were all for it! When Moses came down from the mountain and told the people what God said, they said unanimously, "We'll do it! We know God loves us and we love him, so we'll do what he says!" And the people made a solemn promise.

Afterwards, God sent Moses back up the mountain. Joshua went with him. God would again reveals his will... his laws... for his people. And God also would chisel the 10 Commandments on stone tablets for the people. Aaron was left in charge while he would be away.

While they were away, something terrible happened. The people grew impatient. During the 1<sup>st</sup> week, I imagine the people were saying, "We can't wait for Moses to come back and we will hear again what God has revealed!" Then the 2<sup>nd</sup> week comes and goes. "Sure is taking them a while. I can hardly wait!" The third week ends. "Wow, this is taking a while. When will we be getting on the road again to the Promised Land?" After four weeks. "You know, I think maybe some wild animals got them! How long are we just going to sit here in the wilderness?" Then after 5 weeks, the people talk to Aaron, the guy in charge. "Look, it would seem Moses isn't coming back. You're the new leader. And while we're at it, we'll need a new god too... something visible that we can all have contact with and touch." Aaron obliged. He gathered anything made of gold from the people, melted it down and fashioned a calf out of the gold. Then he said, "Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt!"

God's not stupid. He tells Moses what's going on. With the 10 Commandments in hand, Moses heads down the mountain with Joshua. And here's where we pick up the text:

It's a longer reading so let me give you something to listen for. This reading contains the only instance when a person broke all 10 Commandments of God at the same time. Who was such a terrible person that he broke all 10 Commandments? Listen:

<sup>15</sup> Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. <sup>16</sup> The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.

<sup>17</sup> When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, "There is the sound of war in the camp." <sup>18</sup> Moses replied: "It is not the sound of victory, it is not the sound of defeat; it is the sound of singing that I hear."

<sup>19</sup> When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. <sup>20</sup> And he took the calf the people had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.

<sup>21</sup> He said to Aaron, "What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?"

<sup>22</sup> "Do not be angry, my lord," Aaron answered. "You know how prone these people are to evil. <sup>23</sup> They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.' <sup>24</sup> So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!"

<sup>25</sup> Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies. <sup>26</sup> So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, "Whoever is for the LORD, come to me." And all the Levites rallied to him.

<sup>27</sup> Then he said to them, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.'" <sup>28</sup> The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. <sup>29</sup> Then Moses said, "You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day."

Who broke all 10 Commandments? Moses! He threw them down and they shattered.

Now, the question of the day is: "Who's number one?" We're applying this to our hearts and lives. First, let's ask that question of the Israelites. Who was #1 in their hearts and lives? For a time it was the Lord. But when Moses stayed up on that mountain for almost a month and a half, it is evident the Lord was no longer #1. How can we tell?

- 1) Disregard for the Lord, his past works, and his word and promises. They no longer acknowledged or cared that God had led them out of Egypt with great miracles, or that he promised to give them their own land. For immediate pleasure they abandoned the Lord, ignored his past works and disregarded his promises. They no longer cared what God said, and they decided *they* would call the shots now. God's will and his law were ejected from their hearts and lives. Clearly God was not number one.
- 2) Misplaced credit, glory and worship. They gave credit for their freedom from Egypt to a false god. They claimed the calf was a god that saved them. They worshipped and prayed to a non-god. By giving the credit and glory where it was *not* deserved, they proved God was not number 1. They shifted their trust to something else.
- 3) Offerings. In their offerings it was evident who was number one. They all gave lots of gold to make this false god! What they did with their material possessions clearly showed God was no longer number 1.
- 4) Finally, and this one's the biggest: SELF INDULGENCE. How can we tell God was no longer number 1? Because they were partying it up, indulging themselves. Their wild party was not so much praise for a God, as it was an indulgence of concentrated, selfish pleasure.

Let's apply these same criteria to our own lives to evaluate who's number one in our hearts and lives. You know God's not number one in your heart and life if...

- 1) You observe a disregard for the Lord, his past works, his word and his promises. Do you daily think about and appreciate the forgiveness and life God gave you as a gift through the shed blood of his Son Jesus? Or have you forgotten what he's done for you? Do you truly care about God's will for your life? Do you feel his law apply to you today? Or do you dismiss what he says and do what you think is right in your own eyes?
- 2) Where do you give credit and glory for your successes? What or who do you adore and worship? Self? Others? Chance?
- 3) How about your offerings and management of possessions? Think carefully on what you spend your money on, and what you give back to the Lord. Does this give you insight into who is number one in your life?
- 4) And the big one: How self-indulgent is your life? Do your time and resources focus on you? Or are they focused on the Lord and others?

Those are some uncomfortable questions to ask, aren't they? In fact they're so uncomfortable, it's really hard to answer them honestly. When confronted by Moses, Aaron found excuses for kicking the true God out of the number one spot. Moses asked his brother, "**What did these people do to you that you led them into such a great sin?**" Moses is thinking... did they torture you? Did they waterboard you until you caved and agreed to make the golden calf? Help me understand, brother!" But all he had were excuses.

- The people were evil... not him.
- You, Moses, were gone too long.
- Then a lie: We threw the gold into the fire, and out popped this calf!
- But the true excuse was lying underneath: It was expedient and easy to follow the will of the people instead of the will of God.

We're just as good at making up excuses, aren't we? Why do we not always allow God to rule as number one in our hearts and lives?

- Well, people are so evil and tempting me all the time. It's other people's fault.
- Well, circumstances were such that I really couldn't do otherwise.
- Or, "I didn't plan things this way... it's just how they turned out. I was helpless."
- But the true excuse is: I want to do what I want. Not what God wants. I want to do what feels good and seems right *to me*. God will not call the shots in my life, I will. I'm aware of what he wants me to do. Or say. Or the attitude he wants me to have... but I will not. I'll do what I want.

Friends, this is danger ground. And we need to understand the consequences of our kicking God out of the number one spot in our hearts. God was furious at the Israelites. At first he wanted to destroy them all, but Moses interceded for them. Then Moses saw for himself what they were doing, and in righteous anger he smashed the law of God contained on the tablets. He ground up the false god and made them eat it. And then he called those who remained faithful, the Levites, to come to him, and then to go out and kill the idolaters. They were to show that God and his will were number one... even above family and friend relationships. The wicked, selfish, idolatrous ring-leaders lost their lives that day... about 3,000 of them.

God is just as serious about our sin and our refusal to make him number one in our hearts and lives. So let's make this a day of confession and repentance. Let's honestly admit to ourselves and to God... and if you want meet with me privately later, let me know, because sometimes it's beneficial to admit to a pastor... let's admit the areas of our lives where God isn't number one. No excuses. No justifying. No blaming others. Come clean before God.

And then know this. You are clean before God through his holy Son, Jesus Christ. The perfect, holy, innocent blood of Jesus was shed on a cross to remove the guilt of this sin forever. We are confident of this because he said, "It is finished!" and he rose on the third day to prove it. Although we have been faithless, God has remained faithful.

Isn't that amazing? How will we react to this? How can we not make God number one? C.S. Lewis said, "Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important."

Christianity is of infinite importance, isn't it? Now wrestle with this question today: If you consider Christianity to be of infinite importance, and God truly is number one in your life, what will this look like on a daily basis? Who is number one? God is. May God help us live this truth. Amen.