

Sound Living

The Ten Commandments

Jerry Nelson

Have we in modern American evangelicalism tended to depreciate or even dismiss the role of the law in the life of a Christian?

Have we made the law some cold, impersonal arbitrary list of dos and don'ts and detached it from the warm, personal desires of the Father for His children?

This low view of the law of God has left people with little understanding of what it means to live as a Christ-follower. But what is the relationship of the law to the believer? And how does grace interact with the law?

The 10 Commandments, or The Law, reflects the very character of God and, as we bear His image, what it means to live in relationship with Him and each other.

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Chapter One

The Law of God in the Life of the Christian Exodus 19-20

Exodus 19:1-6; 20:1-17:

"In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on the very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

"Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, 'This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.'

"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.

'You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.

'You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

How are we who trust in God and believe the Bible is from Him to understand the laws of God?

'Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

'You shall not murder.

'You shall not commit adultery.

'You shall not steal.

'You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

'You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.'

Which of the following laws of God do you feel obligated to obey?

- *"Do not eat the meat of an animal torn by wild beasts."— Exodus 22:31*

- *"Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread; for seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you."* – Exodus 23:15
- *"You shall not steal."* – Exodus 20:15

I'm quite obviously addressing my remarks to those who believe in God **and** believe that He has expressed His will in the Bible about how we are to live.

- Have you ever wondered, when reading your Bible, what commands are for you and which ones you can safely assume were for others of another time?
- Have you ever been bothered by your own apparent inconsistency of dismissing some laws as irrelevant and yet holding to others as important?
- Have you ever been unable to answer someone who says, "You simply pick and choose what to believe in the Bible so on what basis should I believe anything?"
- Have you ever felt that if you accept the laws of the Bible as binding on you or others you are a legalist and you are denying grace?

How are we, who trust in God and believe the Bible is from Him, to understand the laws of God?

I raise these questions because in modern American evangelicalism we have tended to depreciate or even dismiss the role of the law in the life of a Christian. And so I continue to ask:

- Have we left ourselves confused about the place of the law of God in our lives?
- Have we emphasized grace, love and freedom to the point that we have set up a false dichotomy between law and grace?

- Have we created the impression that to obey the law is to reject grace and that to accept grace we must reject the law?
- Have we made of the law some kind of cold, impersonal, arbitrary list of dos and don'ts and detached it from the warm, personal desires of the Father for His children?

The way I ask those questions certainly conveys to you that I think we have a very unbiblical and thus harmful view of the law of God. I say "harmful" view of the law of God because I believe some evangelical teaching has left Christians with no guidance in what it means to be a Christ-follower.

- Years of disregarding the commands of God have left people with little understanding of what it means to live Christianly.
- Years and years of saying we are not under law but under grace have left people thinking the laws of God are largely irrelevant.

I think it can be reasonably said that this low view of the law of God and even more importantly low view of God are partly responsible for the decay of godly living among evangelicals.

- Why is our divorce rate as high (some say higher) than the general population?
- Why is abortion nearly as common among believers as unbelievers?
- Sexual promiscuity among young and old, living together outside of marriage, lawsuits, gambling, dishonesty, revenge, greed and the like are seen as equally common among those who call themselves Christians as those who don't.

In Romans 2:24 Paul says, "*God's name is blasphemed* (held in low or no regard) among the (unbelievers) *because of you.*" Where are the people of God shining as light in the darkness? I recently heard of a man who said that he understood the message of the gospel, he even found it appealing, but his problem was that he didn't want to be LIKE the man who was presenting the message to him. Our lifestyles lay the lie to what we claim!

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Having made such an indictment, do I think that the reimposition of a code of conduct, with sufficiently severe penalties, will correct the situation? Absolutely not! But as I said earlier, in our effort to keep out of one ditch on the road of life we have driven right into the other. I know there are those who say that the corrective is not to refer people to the law but to love. As one famous man reportedly said, "Love God and do as you please." There is great truth in that statement but misunderstood, it disregards too much of the Bible.

And so again, what are we to make of the laws of God? What is the relationship of the law to the believer? When the Apostle Paul said in Romans 6:14 (and 6:15), "*You are not under law, but under grace*" what did he mean? There is a popular misconception that before Christ came people were saved on the basis of keeping the law and that because so few were able to keep the law, Jesus came and changed the basis of salvation to grace. The Scofield Reference Bible was for many years a purveyor of this error. In his comment on John 1:17, for example, Scofield

wrote that under the Mosaic covenant, "legal obedience (is) the condition of salvation."¹

I want you to see that salvation has never been by works or law-keeping but has always been by grace through faith—both in the New Testament **and** in the Old Testament. For one example, both the Old and New Testaments make it clear that Abraham (going back to Genesis 15) "*believed God and it was credited to him for*

On what basis are they saved? On the basis of law-keeping? No! They were saved as Abraham was and as we are—by grace through faith.

righteousness." (See Genesis 15:6 and Romans 4:9 among other places) Someone might say, "Well that was before Moses and before people were put under the law." Okay, let's look at the people of Israel "under the law." Look at Exodus 6. Here early in the story of God's rescue of Israel from Egypt, God says:

*"Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and **I will redeem you** with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. **I will take you as my own people**, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.'*" (Exodus 6:6-7 – emphasis added)

- Notice that no law has yet been given as will later happen on Mt. Sinai.
- Notice that God does **not** say if you will keep all of My laws then I will redeem you, save you.
- It is all of grace—He declares His salvation of them.

After they were set free from Egypt by God and had crossed the Red Sea on dry ground this is what Moses and the people sang: *"In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed."* (Exodus 15:13) Then when they came to the mountain of God in Sinai we read in Exodus 19:3-4: *"Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, 'This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.'"*

I ask you, "By that time, are the people of Israel 'redeemed,' 'saved,' already?" Yes! On what basis are they saved? On the basis of law-keeping? No! They were saved as Abraham was and as we are—by grace through faith. To be sure, there were people in Moses' day, in Jesus' day and in our day who think God says we become acceptable to Him by keeping the law. But that has never been what God has said.

Now if we understand that the law was never intended to save anyone, it leads us to ask what the law is for? We can no longer dismiss the law as merely "legalism" for another time. We must find another explanation, a biblical explanation for it. Do you remember when I began the sermon I asked, "Which of the following laws of God do you feel obligated to obey?"

- *"Do not eat the meat of an animal torn by wild beasts."*(Exodus 22:31)
- *"Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread; for seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you."*(Exodus 23:15)
- *"You shall not steal."*(Exodus 20:15)

I intentionally selected three laws that illustrate the distinctions in the law that have been classically observed.

They are three:

- The **Moral law** expressed most succinctly in the 10 Commandments and in the Great Command of Jesus in Matthew 22 and also in the narratives of the Bible where we see God in action.
- The **Civil law** expressed in the elaborate codes of conduct.
- And, the **Ceremonial law** expressed in the sacrifices and temple worship.

To be sure, these are intertwined in the Scriptures, as they should be.

Let's look first at **The Moral Law** containing those unchanging moral imperatives or requirements that reflect the character of God and our relationship with Him and each other. That moral law is found long before Exodus 20, as far back as Genesis, and they are reiterated throughout the Old Testament and reconfirmed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 and by the writers of the New Testament. Prior to Exodus 20, this moral law is what Paul is talking about in Romans 2:14-15: *"Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them."*

Some have called this "natural law," meaning what all reasonable people concur about the rules by which life should be lived—for example that murder is wrong. Some would say this natural or moral law is simply common sense, we just know it intuitively. Others, us included, would say that's true but it has its ultimate source not simply in human reason but **in God** who created us to understand and operate by these rules. The Scripture is

very clear about the source of moral law. It is repeatedly affirmed that when God came down on Mt. Sinai He wanted the people to hear for themselves that **these words came from God.**

Just one Old Testament example of this is in Exodus 19:9:

*"The LORD said to Moses, 'I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear **me** speaking with you.'" (See also Deuteronomy 4:10-13, 35-36; 5:22) And the New Testament Apostles Peter and Paul wrote, the Bible "never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke **from God** as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:21) And, "**All Scripture is God-breathed** and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." (Emphasis Added)*

The Moral Law contains those unchanging moral imperatives or requirements that reflect the character of God and our relationship with Him and each other.

I will come back to the moral law of God a little later. But remember the moral law reflects the very person and character of God and His image in us.

In addition to the moral law there is also the changing **Civil laws** or structures. These civil laws were given to help the people know how to live out their relationship with God and each other in their situation. It's very important to remember that the Israelites had been living in slavery for nearly 500 years and under the powerful influence of a pagan culture. In the civil laws God lays down, He shows them how to live as a new people with their own culture. Two-million-plus people were uprooted from a culture antithetical to God and led across a desert to a new land. There was nothing they didn't need. They needed instructions on making a living, settling disputes, about

property, food, health, and moral treatment of each other—the “stuff” of a culture. These civil laws supported the moral imperatives. They were specific applications for that time.

Not only were there unchanging moral laws and changing civil laws but there was also a temporary **Sacrificial Law** or system. The elaborate sacrifices that we find in the Mosaic law, the detailed system of worship, the intricacies of the tabernacle and temple were all to prefigure the ultimate sacrifice of the Son of God. The writer of Hebrews, speaking of the people during Moses’ day wrote, *“We also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did.”* (Hebrews 4:2) Old Testament believers trusted in God that He would in the future deal with their sins in ways that bloody animal sacrifices never could. The way whereby God’s people could be justified and made righteous was, as I said earlier, by grace through faith.

Just as the Israelites were given commands to help them develop into the people God wanted for His glory and their good, so we are given many commands to understand how to build a new culture—the people of God.

As to these laws of sacrifice and the elaborate temple requirements and rituals, the New Testament book of Hebrews speaks extensively of how the coming and death of Jesus fulfilled and hence superseded the entire Old Testament sacrificial system. We don’t sacrifice sheep on an altar any longer because the “Lamb of God” has been sacrificed once for all His people. Also, Jesus said that worship is no longer relegated to the temple in Jerusalem (John 4:21-23). The coming and death of Jesus fulfilled all

that the Old Testament sacrificial and ceremonial law looked forward to. Not only did the sacrificial system and laws become obsolete by a new and living way through Christ (Hebrews 10:20) but the civil laws were also no longer applicable in the same way as before.

You can see changes in the civil laws even within the period of the Old Testament as when the people finally entered the Promised Land and also when they took a human king to be over them. But the most significant change took place when the Messiah came. For example Jesus did not recommend that the woman caught in adultery be stoned. How could He abrogate/nullify the "Civil Law" that said one caught in adultery was to be stoned? Of course He was not saying adultery (an unchanging moral imperative) was okay, but He was saying that the administration (the civil structures) of that law against adultery had changed with His coming.

Under the new administration of Christ both the sacrificial laws as well as the civil laws are fulfilled or changed. Animal sacrifices (Hebrews 9-10), holy days (Galatians 4:10), penalties (John 8), temple worship (John 4:21), instructions on food (Colossians 2:16) and the like reflect the change in the way the covenant of grace is carried out. When the Messiah came He spoke of a new culture, a new people, God will build—the church. Using the very same language God used to describe the people of Israel in Exodus 19, God now describes the church: *"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God..."* (1 Peter 2:9)

And then just as the Israelites were given commands to help them develop into the people, the culture, the community God wanted for His glory and their good, so we are given many commands to understand how to build a new culture—to become in practice what we are by grace—the people of God. Again, no one is suggesting that

obeying these commands **saves us** but we grow and we reflect our relationship with God by obeying His commands. Again, we are saved by grace through faith. Obedience doesn't earn the grace but it does reflect it.

Neither Jesus nor Paul had any difficulty using the word "command" from the Lord.

- *"If you love me you will obey what I command."* (John 14:15)
- *"In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers."* (2 Thessalonians 3:6)
- *"To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife."* (1 Corinthians 7:10-11)
- *"Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God."* (1 Thessalonians 4:1)
- *"I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."* (Ephesians 4:1)

Over and over again in many of his letters to the churches, before Paul gives the commands, he first lays out the truth that our relationship is established by grace through faith. (Romans 1-8; Eph 1-3; Colossians). So again, the obedience doesn't produce grace but it does reflect it.

But I want to come back to the first use of the word law that I discussed earlier—The Moral Law of God. Following many others, most importantly Jesus and Paul, I contend that the moral law of God is a reflection of the very character of God and, as we bear His image, of what it means to live in relationship with Him and each other. As

such moral law is eternal, unchanging and yes, binding on all God's people of all ages. The 10 Commandments are treated throughout Scripture as a summary of the moral law of God. As I suggested earlier, the 10 Commandments given at Mt. Sinai were simply the written expression of what had existed from before the beginning. Stealing didn't become wrong at Sinai. It was already wrong and known to be wrong by all; conscience dictated it. Conscience itself is a reflection of the moral law of the universe built into people by God at creation.

The moral law of God is a reflection of the very character of God and, as we bear His image, of what it means to live in relationship with Him and each other.

Here is a very important point: the moral law of God is an expression of the person of God. The law is about God first of all, showing us who He is and who we are to be as His children. Obedience is response to a person not merely response to a principle or a law. We are not to simply know or obey the law in some abstract way, detached from the lawgiver. We wish to know God; to know Him is in largest part through His word, His law. Please remember that the law, called the "torah" is not just the list of dos and don'ts of the Bible but is also the narratives of God's actions toward His people.² The entire Old Testament gives us insight into the person of God. Faith and obedience are the primary ways of responding to that God.

Listen to what one man says obedience is about: "Life in relationship with God means that certain words and acts do justice to that relationship in a way that other acts and words do not."³ Following Christ means something and the Bible, including the law, tells us what it means. Obedience to the Law is one way of bearing witness to the reality and

beauty of God. We don't only sing songs but we obey God. Matthew 5:16 says, *"let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."* Yes that includes specific deeds (not lying, stealing, etc) but it is so much more than mere compliance—it is a lifestyle reflecting our Lord to the world around us. Thoughtless children and legalists think only of complying with the letter of the law.

***I must never detach my obedience
from my relationship to Jesus;
I am following Him.***

One who loves God thinks of the spirit of the law as well. The Bible is not a "morality manual with an index we flip through to find answers."⁴ God always meant for the people to love and obey **Him** not just His laws. And He always meant for it to be from our hearts:

- *"Oh, that their **hearts** would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!"*
(Deuteronomy 5:29)
- *"These commandments I give you today are to be upon your **hearts**."*(Deuteronomy 6:6)
- *"I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my **heart**."*(Psalm 40:8 – All Emphasis Added)

So what is my relationship to the moral law of God? That law expressed in the 10 Commandments and expressed in the commands of the New Testament gives me insight into the very heart of my Savior. Each command reveals the character of my God and my privilege to bear His image in my life. My response is to the One who gives the law not to the law in and of itself. I must never detach my obedience

from my relationship to Jesus; I am following Him. And that means I want to know what He thinks, how He acts and what He loves, that I may think, act and love like Him.

As we look at each moral imperative, each written reflection of the character of God given in the 10 Commandments and seen perfectly in the person of Jesus, I want to know Him that I may be more like Him. We are not legalists, we are lovers—lovers of God. Is the moral law of God binding on me? Yes, because I am bound to Jesus. I am saved by His grace and desire to reflect His image.

Psalm 119:97 says,

*"Oh, how I love your law!
I meditate on it all day long."*

End Notes

¹ F.B. Meyer suggests the same in *Studies in Exodus*, p. 220

² See the larger discussion of the law as "torah" set in narrative—the actions of God

³ Terrance Fretheim, *Romans*, p. 207

⁴ Peter Enns, *Romans*, p. 383

Chapter Two

The Beauty of God in the Beauty of the Law Exodus 19-20

Exodus 19:1-6:

"In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on the very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

"Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, 'This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'" These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.'"

Exodus 20:1-3:

"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.'"

With those words, God begins the statement of the Decalogue—the ten words which we call the Ten Commandments, the summary of the moral law of God. I want to start today where I finished the last chapter when I quoted King David in Psalm 119:

"Oh, how I love your law!

I meditate on it all day long.”(Psalm 119:97)

Do we love the law of God? C.S. Lewis, at first, found David’s remark a bit over the top. It’s one thing to know something is good for you like the dentist’s drill, but it is quite another to say you love it. “Love” is not only an emotion of warmth but of beauty. We might look at the beauty of a sunset and say “I love it” meaning I’m in awe and I’m captured by the color, the pattern, the imagination, and the magnitude of it. But there is not only visual beauty, there is moral beauty. Lewis wrote of Psalm 119 where David says he loves the law, “The order of the Divine mind, embodied in the Divine law, is beautiful. (Therefore) what should a person do but try to reproduce it, so far as possible, in his daily life? His ‘delight’ is in those statutes (v. 16); to study them is like finding treasure (v. 14); they affect him like music (and become) his songs (v. 54); they

The “law” is not simply the lists of do’s and don’ts found in the Bible but the law is a reflection of the very person and work of God. The Bible is not a rulebook.

taste like honey (v. 103); they are better than silver and gold (v. 72). As one’s eyes are more and more opened, one sees more and more in them, and it excites wonder (v. 18). This is not priggery (overly exacting); it is the language of a man ravished by a moral beauty. If we cannot at all share his experience, we shall be the losers.”¹ When David read the law, he saw the beauty of God in it. No one familiar with the Bible can deny that it claims that the primary purpose for which humanity exists, as the Westminster Catechism states it, is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Jesus, quoting the Old Testament and summarizing it said, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”*(Matthew 22:37)

I want to talk again about the purposes of the law of God. Much of our Bible is Old Testament but unfortunately we too often dismiss it as for another people and time. At best we look for principles that we can apply today. But it is so much more. Before we study what we call the Ten Commandments I want you to see that they are indeed a summary of the much more extensive "law." We usually think of "law" as merely rules and regulations. But the Bible often uses the word differently. The word "law" is sometimes a reference to the entire Old Testament. The word "law" more often is a reference to the first five books of the Old Testament. Or to all the commandments or even the 10 Commands.

What I want you to note is that the "law" is not simply the lists of dos and don'ts found in the Bible but the law is a reflection of the very person and work of God. The Bible is not a rulebook but a story. And the central character in the story from beginning to end is God. Even here in Exodus where the commandments of God are first spelled out, they are done so in the midst of story.

God not only **tells** His people how to behave but He **shows** them how they should behave—they are to behave as He behaves. In the story we see God's behavior. We see God living out the very character of His nature—we see Him behaving the way He is.

"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." (Exodus 19:4)

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." (Exodus 20:2)

He acts lovingly because He is love; He acts justly because He is just, etc.

The story and the commandments together show us who God is. King David understood this when he wrote:

"O my people, hear my teaching" ("Torah" – law) (Psalm 78:1)

"The praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob..." (Psalm 78:4-5) When you read the Old Testament you are not merely reading stories about other people a long time ago or about codes of conduct that they had to follow—you are reading the story of God. Might I call the whole Bible the autobiography of God?

Now more to the point of the Ten Commandments; when we look at them we see not only how we should behave (which I will talk about later) but we first of all see **who God is and how He behaves**. What I have already begun showing you is the first of four uses of the Law of God.

The Law:

- Reflects the character of God;
- Teaches us how to be like God in our character and conduct;
- Restrains sin in society;
- Reveals our need for the Savior.

What I have already said about how the law reflects the very character of God is not only true of the whole law (the stories and commandments) but is also true of the Ten Commandments themselves. I'm indebted to Philip Ryken, pastor of the 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for these specifics.

The **first** commandment reveals the "unique sovereignty" of our God when He says, *"You shall have no other gods before me."* (Exodus 20:3)

The **second** commandment says, in Exodus 20:4-6, *"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters*

below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments." This reveals that God is spirit not physical body, that He is the creator and that He is a God of justice and mercy.

The **third** commandment reveals that God is "honorable," holy; everything about Him including the name by which He is known is holy and again that He is a God of justice. "*You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.*" (Exodus 20:7)

***When we look at the Ten Commandments
we see who God is and how He behaves.***

The **fourth** commandment reveals that God is "sovereign over all the events of daily life." He is Lord of each week and each day. "*Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God.*" (Exodus 20:8-10)

The **fifth** commandment says, "*Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.*" (Exodus 20:12) It reveals God's authority as our Father and His generosity.

The **sixth** commandment reveals God as the giver of life and His "sovereignty over life's end. "*You shall not murder.*" (Exodus 20:13)

The **seventh** commandment reveals our God as "pure and faithful."

"You shall not commit adultery." (Exodus 20:14)

The **eighth** commandment is "*You shall not steal.*" (Exodus 20:15) It reveals our God as the great provider who is trustworthy.

In the **ninth** commandment God is revealed as truth. "*You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.*" (Exodus 20:16)

And in the **tenth** commandment we read, "*You shall not covet...*" revealing a God of providence who will provide everything we need. (Exodus 20:17)²

The commandments God set forth are not arbitrary; they reflect the very character of our God. Whether we are reading the entire law or just the summary of the moral law in the 10 Commandments, we must realize we are **seeing God Himself**—this is about Him before it is about us!

That brings me logically to the next use of the Law of God: It teaches us how to live. Said more precisely, it teaches us how to reflect in our living the character of our God. In both the Old and New Testaments we are called to be holy because God is holy. To Israel God said, "*Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.*" (Leviticus 19:1) To us, the church, He said, "*But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'*" (1 Peter 1:15-16) We are His children, we bear His image, and we are to reflect His character in our words and conduct.

As I mentioned earlier, some would say we don't need the law to help us know how to live because now the law of love guides us. I want to again warn us against setting up law and love as opposing ideas. If we continually remember that the law is an expression of the very nature of our God we won't see love as opposed to law but as complementary. Therefore quite simply the 10 Commandments show us in part how to be and act as our God is and acts. There is a great need for God's people to

be brought back to the instruction of the commandments.

Several years ago writers Patterson and Kim wrote the book, *The Day America Told the Truth*. They said, "Everyone is making up (his) own personal moral code—his own Ten Commandments. Here are some of those commandments in our day:

- I don't see the point in observing the Sabbath.
- I will steal from those who won't really miss it.
- I will lie when it suits me, as long as it doesn't cause any real damage.
- I will drink and drive if I feel I can handle it; I know my limit.
- I will cheat on my spouse—after all, given the chance he or she will do the same.
- I will cheat on my taxes, to a point.
- I will procrastinate at work and do absolutely nothing about one day in five. It's standard operating procedure.

The law is an expression of the very nature of our God.

One woman said, "To be perfectly honest, some laws seem to apply to me, some I disregard...I don't need the (clergy), the press, or some lowly cop to tell me how to live my life." Patterson and Kim went on to write that in America today, "When we want to answer a question of right and wrong, we ask ourselves."³

Several years ago, during his Supreme Court nomination hearing Clarence Thomas was closely questioned about whether he subscribed to Natural Law doctrine—the

universal knowledge that some things are simply wrong while others are obviously right.

Having just finished law school, (one man wrote) "I was surprised not to be more familiar with what the Senators, doing the questioning, thought was a terribly dangerous theory.

"Even more astonishing was that Al Gore voted against Mr. Thomas on the basis of the judge's belief in Natural Law. Imagine then my astonishment when I realized that all they were worrying about was the notion, seemingly obvious to most Americans, that the justness of our laws ultimately depends for its foundation on the universal moral code that God" has written on our hearts and given in the law."⁴

George Orwell wrote, "We have now sunk to a depth at which re-statement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men."⁵ Yes, we need to look again at the obvious; we need to see again that the laws of God, reflecting the character of God, are given for us that we might be like Him. The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:1, "*Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God.*" And in Ephesians 4:1, "*I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received*"—you are God's children.

In the New Testament, every one of the moral imperatives of the Ten Commandments is reiterated in many ways. For example, in Ephesians 6:2 it says, " *'Honor your father and mother,' which is the first commandment...*" For those who think the law of God is not binding on believers today, I would ask them to notice Paul's unembarrassed direct reference to the original statement of this moral imperative in Exodus 20.

We recognize there are two kinds of obedience to the law of God. There is a **legal** obedience; thinking that by law keeping we earn our relationship with God. That is damning

theology. But there is also an **evangelical** obedience; responding to the grace of God as now free to follow and serve our Lord by reflecting His character as revealed in the law. In this study we will look at each of the Ten Commandments and see in them a reflection of our God and instruction as to how we can be more like Him.

***In the New Testament, every one
of the moral imperatives of the Ten
Commandments is reiterated
in many ways.***

But there is a third use of the law that I must mention: the law restrains sin in a society. I speak first of the society of the church—God’s own people. In Exodus 20:20 following the giving of the Ten Commandments, *"Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.'"* In both the Old and New Testaments the commands of God are given with a warning about the seriousness of the commands because they reflect the character of God. There is a healthy “fear” of the Lord that rightly motivates us. Yes, God calls us to love Him, but when we fail to love there is still this one aspect of the “fear of the Lord” that keeps us. The Apostle Peter said it this way: *"As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.' Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear."* (1 Peter 1:14-17)

I want us to take seriously the law of God and the warnings of God that we may become more like Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 says, *"It is God's will that you should be sanctified (set apart to be more like Jesus): that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God... The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit."*

***In a religiously pluralistic society,
all we want is for the government
and its schools to remain neutral on the
subject of religion.***

Not only is the law given to restrain sin in the society of the church but also to restrain sin in the larger society. It is not pleasing to God to see a world become increasingly destructive. God's loving purpose is the salvation of His world not the condemnation of it. He has given His law for the good of all mankind. The question is how can the law have an impact for good when many reject it? And how do Christians carry out their mandate from God to be salt and light in a world that rejects the law of God? How do we exert the right influence in a pluralistic culture?

There are ways in which our country seems very divided: One author said it this way, "On the one side are those who treat the merest scintilla of religion in our public and political life as an offense against the American idea. On the other are those who believe it to be the responsibility of government to use its power to enforce as law the moral truths of their religion."⁶ For us as Christians, it is bad enough when other views of reality such as naturalism and secularism are being promoted by the state (through its

schools) but then the state also decided to make it very difficult for people of faith to have any representation. It is one thing to be pluralistic (allowing for many ideas) it is quite another when one idea (a belief in God) is rejected. It is not simply that the state and schools aren't helping teach the parents' values but that the state and schools are actively working **against** the parents' values. The author I mentioned before, went on to write, "I am not sure why it is more 'fanatical' for parents to tell their children that the creation story in Genesis is literally true than for the public schools to tell the same children, required by law to attend, that the religion of their parents is literally false."⁷ In a religiously pluralistic society, all we want is for the government and its schools to remain neutral on the subject of religion. What we object to is the strongly anti-religion shift in our courts and schools.

So what do we do? Do we try to get enough votes to demand that the 10 Commandments be placed in every classroom and courtroom? In a democratic society I don't see anything wrong with trying to persuade more people to see things our way than the way of others as long as it is done in a manner that reflects the character of our God. Theologian Richard Muow has written a book entitled *Uncommon Decency* that ought to be required reading for any believer who wants to engage others on these subjects. But I am convinced that power politics, done ever so civilly, is not the way Jesus invites His followers to engage the culture. (See the context of 2 Corinthians 6:7 and 10:4)

I fear that posting the Ten Commandments in classrooms and courtrooms will bring a hollow victory. It will be meaningless at best and at worst it relegates the living law of God to an historical relic. I do not think that monuments and placards will slow the decline into relativism that grips our nation's courts and education system. We need a very

different approach. **Our lives** are the way God intends to change society.

I want you to see this as God's purpose for Israel then and the church now. In Exodus 19:3-6, Moses wrote under God's inspiration, *"This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'*"

God is saying that because the whole earth is His, He is choosing Israel to carry out His purposes in the whole earth. For God has in mind that the Israelites be priests to the world and that their holiness be a means to attract the world to their God. It is not first of all about Israel; it is about God and His glory.

God said in Isaiah 49:6

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

And the language of Exodus and Isaiah is used of the church in the New Testament. Notice the terms used (priests and holy nation) and the purpose given: *"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, **that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.**"* (I Peter 2:9 – Emphasis Added)

Much American Evangelicalism has reduced religion to a private affair of getting saved and getting to heaven. And in that vein we think of being a kingdom of priests and a holy nation as being most of all about our own access to God

(“the priesthood of believers” we call it) and living lives that comply with God’s laws so we won’t miss out in the end. But the Bible says in Acts 13:47-48, *“For this is what the Lord has commanded us (just as he commanded Israel: ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’”* “We are to die to sin in order to witness to those still dead in their sins. We are not merely legalists and moralists—we are new creatures in Christ with a mission from God to live such holy lives that others may see your good works and glorify God. Peter said, *“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”* (1 Peter 2:12)

Our lives are the way God intends to change society.

Many years ago Francis Shaeffer said that the way we live our lives and particularly how we love each other is the final apologetic for Christianity. We will never convince people of the truth of God, of a Moral law, of the gospel, and of Christianity if it is not true in us. But I’m impatient. I want to see faster change in me, in you and in our culture. Richard Muow whom I mentioned earlier titled one chapter of his book: “Serving a Slow God.” I must remember God is in charge of timing, and while it appears slow to us, it is perfect. I know that is not even close to the final word on the role of the Ten Commandments in a pluralistic society but in our desire to rescue our culture from its decline I urge you to consider the weightier matter of being salt and light.

Finally I come to the fourth use of the Law. The Law reveals our need for the Savior! The Bible makes it very clear that God never intended for anyone to be saved by

keeping the law:

"Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."(Romans 3:19-20)

Phillip Ryken wrote, "Why did God give his people the law? The answer is that he gave them his law so they would believe his gospel."⁸ The more we look at the law of God the more we realize how incapable we are of keeping it. The more we see God's character reflected in the law the more we realize how far short we fall. And when Jesus takes the bare laws of Exodus 20 and explains them in the Sermon on the Mount He gives the far deeper meaning that gets to our very hearts and motives. We realize all over again how incapable we are of meeting the just demands of a holy God. That is what God wants. He wants to drive us to His grace in Jesus.

Augustine wrote, "The usefulness of the law lies in convicting man of his infirmity and moving him to call upon the remedy of grace which is in Jesus Christ."

Martin Luther said, "Therefore we do not abolish the law; but we show its true function and use, namely that it is a most useful servant impelling us to Christ. After the law humbled, terrified, and completely crushed us...(it) drove us to Christ."

Calvin wrote, "Moses had no other intention than to invite all (people) to go straight to Christ."

Spurgeon said, "As the sharp needle prepares the way for the thread, so the piercing law makes a way for the bright silver thread of divine grace."⁹

And so when we read the 10 Commandments we realize

how incapable we are of keeping them. That drives us to Jesus for His mercy of forgiveness when we fail and His grace to empower us by His Spirit to increasingly obey and reflect His life in ours.

Jeremiah prophesied a day when the law of God would be written on our hearts. By the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit that is now true—by His power we may obey, we may reflect God’s life in ours. As we look at each command in this study, we will again see our need for Jesus’ mercy and grace.

The four uses of the law are to:

- Reflect the character of God
- Teach us how to live like Him
- Restrain sin in the church and society, and
- Reveal our daily need for Jesus’ mercy and grace.

End Notes

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, p. 54-65

² Philip Ryken, *Prepublished commentary on Exodus*, p. 525-27

³ James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth*, p. 25-27

⁴ www.brothersjudd.com/index.cfm/fuseaction/reviews.detail/book_id/1270/

⁵ J. Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know*, p. 15

⁶ Stephen Carter, *God's Name in Vain*, p. 1

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 3

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 542

⁹ Ryken, *Ibid*, p. 542

Chapter Three

Who is your God? Exodus 20:1-3

"In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on the very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

"Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, 'This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'" These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.'" (Exodus 19:1-6)

"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." (Exodus 20:1-3)

15 years, or so, ago there was a man regularly attending our church that was married and had two young daughters. The youngest daughter, then about four years of age, developed a fatal cancer. For over two years that father prayed and cried and even bargained with God for the life of his child. The struggle in his soul was intense as he wavered between helpless begging of God and angry denial of the very existence of God. The child died and the father abandoned even any pretence of faith in God. He left the church and his family. I was very sympathetic to the pain

that father experienced but I was quite judgmental of his conclusions and his actions. Oh, to be sure, his conclusions and his abandonment of God and family were wrong but what I didn't see then was the much larger underlying issue of who His god was.

We are tempted to have a different god for each area of life. But God comes and says He will be number one in all of life!

1800 years ago, one of the early church fathers wrote, "What each one honors before all else, what before all (other) things he admires and loves, this for him is God."¹ The young father I have been describing had a greater loyalty and love for his daughter than for God. Oh, he said he believed in God but when the chips were down it became apparent where his greater loyalty lay. Now as I said, I was quite judgmental of his actions and his conclusions at the time. Why could he not simply trust God? Much more recently, as I have reported to you at other times, when, from my perspective, **my own** son's life was threatened I found myself where that young father had been years earlier. My love and loyalty to my son were testing my love and loyalty to God. Who did I value most? Could I trust God? Would I trust God? Would my love for God hold even if He took from me my precious son? Where was my **greatest** allegiance? Which was truly my God?

Who or what is your God? Maybe the question is better asked, "Who are our many gods?" Polytheism, the trust in many gods, has been the inclination of humans for millennia. Ancient peoples, and even some in parts of the world today, believed in a god of love, a god of fertility, a god of healing, a god of war, a god of prosperity—a veritable pantheon of gods for each and every situation of

life. Have we done the same not by carving little stone statues but in our minds? We have a god of our religious life and he is in mind when we gather for worship. But we may also have made a god of someone we love and/or our family—we have a higher allegiance to those relationships than to our relationship with God. And we may have made a god of our occupation, with greater loyalty to acquisition and position than to God. And we may have made a god of our recreation or pleasure—trusting in sports or sex or something else to meet our demands. We take greater pleasure in those things than in God. Of sex, one author noted, “Openmouthed, the impressionable young drink it in, and proclaim that in love is their salvation. He who is not continually fizzing like champagne with sexual excitement is considered a failure in life. (In their thinking,) nothing, no outmoded morality (Bible) or promise (marriage) or sense of obligation must come between the worshiper (them) and his/her supreme goal—(sexual satisfaction).”²

We are tempted to have a different god for each area of life. We think we give the religious god his due in church but then we serve a different god in business, in recreation, in pleasure, and even in family. But God comes and says I will be number one in all of life! In Exodus 20:2-3 He says, *“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.”* It is called the first commandment, as well it should be, because it declares the foundation of all the others.

In this study I have asserted that the 10 Commandments reveal much of the character of God to us—they describe God. And so God begins by declaring, “I am the LORD.” This self-revelation of God comes from the simple four letter Hebrew word we transliterate as Yahweh. A simple word but it carries the most profound and most fundamental description of God. That word

“Yahweh”/“LORD” is the most reverent way of referring to God in the entire Bible. Here we see the essential nature of God—who He is. Back in Exodus 3:14 *"God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.'* "I am the One who always is.

God is saying that He is not a concept or some abstract principle; He is the living, active God. It is *inappropriate* to speak of God only as “was” or only as “will be” because He always is or simply “Am.”

In the name, “LORD” (Yahweh) God reveals who He is—the sovereign One. And it designates the legitimacy of His authority—He is before all things, He created and controls all things and He will dispose of all things according to His will. He has the authority to give commands to His creatures. It is monstrous that we should attempt to remove ourselves from His authority or pretend it doesn't exist. Romans 11:36 says, *"For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."*

You say you believe in God? What God? The creator, the sovereign one? David said in Psalm 14:1, *"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'* " But there are just as many, maybe more, who say “I believe in God but so what?” Don't you see it? If God is the God He says He is, self-preservation alone would say we must know and bow to His will. As many have pointed out, “No, Lord,” is a foolhardy oxymoron. Joy Davidman the wife of C.S. Lewis, wrote, “The man who says, ‘One God,’ and does not care, is an atheist in his heart. The man who speaks of God (but) will not recognize the presence of God burning in his mind as Moses recognized him in the burning bush—that man is an atheist, though he speak with the tongues of men and angels and appears in his seat every Sunday, and make large contributions to the church.”³ If God is who He says He is, nothing, absolutely nothing could be more important than knowing and responding to Him. Common sense alone

would say we must hold allegiance only to Him. We must be rid of any other gods in our lives. God alone Yahweh—the ever-existing sovereign Lord.

But He not only says He is the LORD but He is “Your God.” Added to His unquestionable sovereignty as LORD, is His grace as “your God.”

- He calls us into loving relationship with Himself.
- Exodus 19:4 says, *“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.”*
- He compares Himself to an eagle carrying her young to safety.

If God is who He says He is, nothing, absolutely nothing could be more important than knowing and responding to Him.

- He invites us elsewhere to call Him “Father.”
- Still elsewhere He compares Himself to a mother tenderly caring for her children.
- And still elsewhere, as a Shepherd protecting, providing, and leading.
- He’s the prodigal’s father with tears streaming down his face, running to embrace his returning son.
- He’s the husband who takes his adulterous wife back into his arms.

Jeremiah 31:3 says, *“I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.”* And, John 3:16 says, *“For God so loved the world...”*

We are in relationship with that God—the God who loves

us. The Ten Commandments are set in the context of that love relationship, God and us. He is not a genie in a lamp as in Aladdin whose only role was to be asked and then left alone. God calls us to live in on-going relationship with Him and the commandments give us insight into that relationship. J.I. Packer wrote, "The Pharisees lovelessly served the law, depersonalized all relationships and dehumanized themselves and Jesus damned them for it. Loving relations with God, and with others for his sake, are what his service, as set forth in the Decalogue (Ten Words/Commandments), is really all about: love responding to His love, as he declares 'I am...you shall...,' is the real secret..."⁴

We are people of true hope, reasonable hope, hope based on the promises of an unfailing God.

De Chardin said, "To those who only know it outwardly, Christianity seems desperately intricate. In reality, taken in its main lines, it contains an extremely simple and astonishingly bold solution to the world. In the center, so glaring as to be disconcerting, is the uncompromising affirmation of a personal God: God as providence, directing the universe with loving, watchful care; and God the revealer, communicating himself to (us)..."⁵

Not only does He declare Himself to be the sovereign One—the LORD and not only does He declare Himself to be OUR God who loves us but He also **demonstrates** that sovereignty and love.

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." (Exodus 20:2) God says, I brought you out of Egypt with its myriad gods—gods you couldn't possibly please because to please one was to offend another. Oh how true today—I pursue the god of

acquisition and lose my family. I pursue the god of pleasure and lose my job. And I grow weary trying to appease them all. And, God says, I brought you out of slavery. To each of those gods you owed more than you could pay. You were slaves to each one—living under the fear of not measuring up and losing out. Each god sucking you dry, with no lasting joy found in any one of them.

What was Israel's future in Egypt? Enslavement and death! What was your future without Christ? In this life you were subject to the whims of "fate," or left to your own abilities and to the charity of others and after this life, death, with no reasonable hope of anything beyond except nothingness or worse yet, hell. What would your life be today without Christ? Where would you be tomorrow without Christ?

Paul said to the Colossians, *"He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."* (1:3) Does that mean something to you? Later he says, *"Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified; you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."* (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

What is our future now? We are people of true hope, reasonable hope, hope based on the promises of an unfailing God.

That God, the sovereign (Yahweh), loving ("your God"), redeeming (brought you out of slavery) God is the one who says, "You shall have no other gods before me." Is that just a threat? No! God is not a teenager who pouts and

retaliates if his girlfriend talks to another boy. This is the loving God who knows that all other allegiances lead ultimately to our dissatisfaction and death and that only in Him is life—life as it was meant to be lived.

This command is not merely a threat, it is the way of life! Other gods are cul-de-sacs of death. Jesus said in John 17:3, "*Now this is life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*" Only in relationship with God is there life, now and forever. We have been freed from other gods in order to be free...

"You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness." (Romans 6:18) Obedience then is an outgrowth of this relationship. Never should we think like the rich young ruler that we have kept the law and are therefore okay having done the required. Rather obedience is simply practical love; when I obey, I'm not measuring, I'm loving, living in relationship.

And God shows us in part what that living relationship looks like. As I have said before, law and love are not opposites. One commentator wrote, "The (commandments of God) do not lose their particularity in the command to love; they simply open up those particularities to limitless possibilities. Love always means going beyond whatever laws may be articulated, but it needs their particularity for instruction purposes, charting something of what love may entail in specific situations."⁶ That fits with Jesus' interpretation of the Ten Commandments when He said, "*You have heard it said (the law)...But I say to you...(the even deeper meaning of the law)*"

And so what does having no other gods before the true God mean? I have read that the best way to detect counterfeit money is to know the real thing. The best way to detect idolatry, allegiance to other gods in our lives, is to know what true allegiance to one God really is. When Jesus was asked in Matthew 22:36-38, "*Teacher, which is the*

greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment." Jesus explains the negative "you shall have no other gods before me" in a positive "Love the Lord your God with all your heart soul and mind."

So what does "no other gods before me" look like? First of all, "before me" doesn't mean that we can have other gods as long as we claim God is number one. "Before me" means we must have no other gods in God's presence. We can't pretend God is our God if we bring other gods into our lives. John Calvin said it is like a man bringing the woman of his adulterous affair right into his home in front of his wife.⁷

Obedience then is an outgrowth of this relationship. Obedience is simply practical love; when I obey, I'm not measuring, I'm loving, living in relationship.

God will allow only one primary allegiance—He is either our only God or He is not our God at all. Jesus said, *"No man can serve two masters."* So who is the object of our affections? Who do we think about in our free time? Who are we trying to impress? Who are we living for? Martin Luther said, "A god is that to which we look for good and in which we find refuge in time of need...That to which our heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your god." Idolatry "neither cares for (the real) God nor expects good things from him sufficiently to trust that he wants to help nor does it believe that whatever good it receives comes from God. Do you have the kind of heart that expects from God nothing but good, especially in distress and want, and renounces and forsakes all that is not God? Then you have the one true God. On the contrary, does your heart cling to

something else, from which it hopes to receive more good and help than from God, and does (your heart) flee not to God but from him when things go wrong? Then you have an idol, another God.”⁸

Nearly 400 years ago Thomas Watson explained what it means to love God with no other gods before Him.

Our desire will be for God—He is why we live.

- We will not seek or find true contentment in anything else but Him.
- We will hate anything that would separate us from God—namely sin.
- We will grieve at what grieves God.
- We will labor to show others how lovely God is.
- We will weep bitterly when our sin clouds His presence.
- We will be willing to obey and even suffer for Him.⁹

And in that same era the Westminster theologians captured it with this answer to the question: “What are the duties required in the first commandment?”

Omnipotent grace ONLY can make a stony heart melt in love.

“The duties required in the first commandment are, the knowing and acknowledging of God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify him accordingly, by thinking, meditating, remembering, highly esteeming, honoring, adoring, choosing, loving, desiring, fearing of him; believing him; trusting, hoping, delighting, rejoicing in him; being zealous for him; calling upon him, giving all praise and thanks, and yielding all obedience and submission to him with (our whole heart); being careful in

all things to please him, and sorrowful when in anything he is offended; and walking humbly with him.” (A104)

What god do you love, trust and obey like that? “Oh,” you say, “I want to love the only true God like that! I want God alone to be my God.” What can make us love God this way? Only grace can make our cold hearts melt in love. “Omnipotent grace ONLY can make a stony heart melt in love.”¹⁰ That is why God reveals Himself to us as the sovereign, loving, redeeming God He is. *“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of slavery.”* That is why Jesus came.

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)

Who is your God, your only God?

The late Clarence and Genevieve DeVries of our church provided a home for Clarence’s elderly and unbelieving father. Genevieve witnessed to him constantly and sometimes she even talked to him about trusting Jesus. It became a special concern to Genevieve as the old man became fatally ill. Grandpa DeVries, as she referred to him, finally said that he would trust Jesus but when he began to plan his funeral he said he wanted a funeral arranged by the Masonic Order. Genevieve was wise enough to know that her father-in-law thought his good works as part of his Masonic membership were how God would judge him worthy of heaven. When he said he trusted in Jesus, the old man was merely saying that he would add Jesus to his other god—his Masonic-style god—in whom he trusted more. Genevieve told him in no uncertain terms that he could not have two gods—either he must accept Jesus as his only God and be buried in a Christian funeral or accept the false god of his Masonic relationship and have his Masonic funeral.

As death approached the old man finally said he would

have both a Masonic funeral and a Christian funeral. But Genevieve held out—"You shall have no other gods before me or in my presence." A day before his death with Genevieve still pleading with him, the man finally said he would place his faith in Jesus alone and he abandoned the Masonic funeral. My purpose is not to denigrate the good work that some Masons do, but to demonstrate in only one of many ways how prone we all are to create other gods and truly trust them more than the one true God.

40 years later than our story at Mt. Sinai, Joshua who had come out of Egypt with its many gods and was about to lead the Israelites into another country teeming with still other gods to lure the people away said: *"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are now living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."* (Joshua 24:14-15) The great, eternal, sovereign, loving, redeeming God is Jesus. Emmanuel, God with us. Using the same name by which God identified Himself to Moses, Jesus said, *"Before Abraham was, I AM."*

The question before you today is "Who is your God?" Is it Jesus? Will you put away all other gods and follow Him alone today? Will you trust Him alone in job, family, health, sickness, pleasure, pain, life and death? Matthew 11:28 -30 says, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened (by your many gods), and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

Maybe you have served many gods for too long and today you are ready to declare, “as for me and my house we will serve the LORD!”

End Notes

¹ Origen cited in Ryken, p. 564

² Joy Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain*, p. 26

³ Ibid, p. 23

⁴ J.I. Packer, “I and You” in *The 10 Commandments*

⁵ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* p. 292 cited in Palmer, p. 48

⁶ Terrence Fretheim, *Exodus*, p. 223

⁷ Calvin 2:8:16

⁸ Luther Book of Concord 1580 p. 365-368 cited in *No Other Gods* by Thomas Oden in *I am the Lord Your God*, p. 42

⁹ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 8ff

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 10

Chapter Four

Worshipping the Right God in the Right Way Exodus 20:4-6

"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. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.'" (Exodus 20:1-6)

Moses said, *"Remember the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb (Mt. Sinai), when he said to me, 'Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children.' You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens, with black clouds and deep darkness. Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice. He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets. And the LORD directed me at that time to teach you the decrees and laws you are to follow in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess.*

"You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape,

whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below. And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars—all the heavenly array—do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshiping things the LORD your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven.”(Deuteronomy 4:10-19)

We have the permanent symbol of a wooden cross reminding us of the basis of our relationship with God.

As you think about the décor of the sanctuary, you may have noticed:

- We don't have statues of Mary the mother of Jesus or of the Apostles.
- We don't have a large image of Christ on the cross, a crucifix at the front of the worship center nor smaller crucifixes on other walls.
- We don't have the Stations of the Cross built in.
- We don't invite you to enter the room and genuflect (cross yourself) in the direction of some picture or statue.
- We don't have pictures of godly men or women of the past (sometimes called Saints) to whom we encourage you to pray.
- And we certainly don't have images, carved or pictured, of the sun, moon or stars, of animals real or imagined, or of human-like figures that we say represent God.

Why not? Why don't we use these images and symbols?

But you may also have noticed that:

- We have shown both still and video pictures of the mountains, the seas and the universe around us reminding us of the glory of our God.
- We have shown images of Jesus lying in a manger, of Jesus healing and teaching, of Jesus hanging on the cross, and of the resurrected and ascending Jesus.
- We have imagined and imaged in pictures the prodigal's father embracing his returning son, reminding us of the loving-mercy of our God.
- We have hung tapestries on our walls with the image of a descending dove reminding us of the Holy Spirit who has come to us.
- We have the permanent symbol of a wooden cross reminding us of the basis of our relationship with God.
- We have the cup and plate of the Lord's Supper displayed weekly reminding us of Jesus' sacrifice for us.

Why? Why do we use these images and symbols?

While I do think that all the images of the first illustrations I used ought not be part of worship, I am not going to argue that all we do is right! I approach my subject with deep humility. That humility has to do with how much I don't know even after giving this much study, thought and prayer for several weeks. What I present to you is my *best effort* at understanding what God is telling us in His Word about the use of images in worship. I offer some of it with the authority of God's Word but I also offer some of it tentatively, not because God is unclear, but because through the years His church has tended to confuse the issues and because godly men and women have differed

greatly on the application to us, God's people.

Some of you might have already thought, "Who cares; these sound like arcane, obscure issues that don't really matter. Some people like and maybe need images to aid in their worship while others don't—no big deal! If you like bells and smells or pictures and statues then find churches that use them and enjoy. If not, don't." It would be easy to be so cavalierly tolerant if it were not for God's word in the 2nd commandment:

"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments." (Exodus 20:4-6)

It's apparently a "big deal" to God.

- He says "you shall not..."
- And He says that those who do, "hate" Him.
- And He says the punishment for disobeying extends to generations.

No other commandment spells out such a severe warning. Again I say, it is apparently very important to God.

So what is He opposed to and why? That word "idol" in verse 4 is the word for **any image** whether shaped, sculpted, painted, woven, macraméd, or today photo or videographed that is worshiped. Now it is quite obvious that God is not opposed to the making of all images because He even commands images to be part of the décor of the Tabernacle and Temple. But verse 5 makes clear that what He opposes are images that we worship—images that we reverence and serve. In other words the images

become forbidden when we worship them. I will address that later.

Our first inclination upon reading verses 4 and 5 is to think they are simply a fuller explanation of verse 3:

"You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:3)

"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them..." (Exodus 20:4-5)

In other words we are inclined to think that these three verses together forbid the idolatrous practices of the Egyptians and the Amorites of centuries ago and of the Hindus and Animists today. But through the centuries the Jews and most Protestants have separated verse 3 from verses 4 and 5 and have seen these as two related but different commandments.

***He opposes images that we worship—
images that we reverence and serve.***

The 1st Commandment prohibits the worship of the wrong god. It prohibits the worship of the Egyptian, Babylonian, Hindu or other gods that people have imagined. You can see this kind of idol worship today in the temples of India or the Shrines of Japan and now even in the larger cities of our own country. The 2nd Commandment prohibits the wrong worship of the one True God.

Let me illustrate this first of all from the Bible and then in our own day.

First look at Exodus 32:1-6:

"When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, 'Come, 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.'

"Aaron answered them, 'Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.' So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'

"When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, 'Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD.' So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry."

***The 2nd Commandment is not about
worshiping false gods but about
worshipping the true God incorrectly.***

In Exodus 32 the people are not violating the 1st commandment directly. They are violating the 2nd commandment. In verse 5 Aaron specifically says this is a festival to YHWH. They made an image to represent their God Jehovah. They are not worshipping the wrong god; they are worshipping the right God in the wrong way by making an image of Him.

Another example is found in 2 Chronicles 33:14-17 where King Manasseh "got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the LORD, as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city. Then he restored the altar of the LORD and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the LORD, the God of Israel. **The people, however, continued to sacrifice**

at the high places, but only to the LORD their God.”¹
They believed they were worshipping the true God but they persisted in doing it in the wrong way.

The point I am attempting to make is that the 2nd Commandment is not about worshipping false gods but about worshipping the true God incorrectly. See it once again in Deuteronomy 12:30-31. Moses said to the people, *"Be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, 'How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same.'* ***You must not worship the LORD your God in their way.***" (Emphasis Added) And so God says, *"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them..."* (Exodus 20:4-5)

Again I can imagine some of you thinking, "We don't do that. We don't set up images of God and bow down to them or worship them." But I would say many who call themselves Christians, do in fact just that. People will put a statue or picture of Mary or some other saint in their own home or their church and bow to it, pray to it, and expect that by so doing they will more likely receive what they request. But I also know of people who use an altar in their church, or a favorite picture of Jesus, or a cross as an icon, a physical thing or an image, that somehow brings them closer to God and almost magically makes connection with God more likely. In our minds, we thoughtlessly invest the place or the image with spiritual power that is God's alone. We can even turn the Lord's Supper into such an idol, imagining that the bread and wine somehow automatically convey blessing to us.

We begin to treat the objects as if they were God, in form. Idols or images are thought to be a point of contact with the divine, with God. By being close to the image or holding it, the worshipper hopes to be closer to God. We can do the

same thing without an actual physical image. There are some who invest a certain liturgy with power to connect them to God. Their worship has to have the right ritual or the right songs (hymns or choruses); it has to set the right mood. Even in our kneeling in prayer we can err by imagining that by the kneeling we are somehow gaining greater acceptability or access to God. It doesn't mean we shouldn't kneel but that we must not invest kneeling with some automatic power to present us to God.

Likewise with the Apostle's Creed—there's no special power in it and we don't gain merit by saying it. It is merely a succinct way of stating the fundamental truths on which our faith is based. *Imageless* idol-making is therefore very possible. We can imagine God in ways that are not who He actually is. We might think of Him only as love, as the kindly old man who overlooks all our failings. Or we may think of Him only as stern, fearsome, judgmental, and wrathful. In these and a thousand other ways we create imageless caricatures of God that are false and we worship and serve those images of Him.

When someone says, "I like to think of God as _____," they are shaping God into their preferred image.² We have already seen that God takes this very seriously. Why? He tells us: "*for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.*" This jealousy is "the burning passion of his love."³ This is a positive jealousy, a rightful jealousy. We belong to God, we are rightly His and for His glory and our good, we are not to belong to another. It's like the mother's jealous protection of her children or a father's jealous guarding of the home of his family. It is His love for us that compels Him to warn us.

For at least two reasons God is opposed to us worshipping images of Him.⁴ The first is that images of God obscure the glory of God, they don't reveal it. Anytime we try to capture God in an image, we leave out so much that we dishonor

Him. Jan Lochman wrote, "God cannot be taken captive. No image and no mental concept can capture him. No cultic (religious) practice and no place of worship can guarantee his presence. No institution or movement possesses him. There are not automatic methods of manipulating him...This commandment counters every attempt to stabilize (or domesticate) the doctrine of God, a constant temptation for all...(but) God is always greater."⁵

God is opposed to us worshipping images of Him because those images of God obscure the glory of God, they don't reveal it.

Aaron's bull that we saw in Exodus 32 may have indicated the strength of YHWH but it said nothing of His moral character. For example, J.I. Packer wrote, "The pathos of a crucifix obscures the glory of Christ, for it hides the fact of his deity, his victory on the cross, and his present kingdom...The symbol is unworthy most of all because of what it fails to display. And so are all other visible representations of Deity...We should not look to pictures of God to show us his glory and move us to worship; for his glory is precisely what such pictures can never show us."⁶

John Calvin said, "We think it unlawful to make any visible figure as a representation of God, because he has himself forbidden it, and it cannot be done **without detracting, in some measure, from his glory.**"⁷ Images of God make Him less than He is; they reduce Him and demean Him.

The second reason God is opposed to worshipping images of Him is that images mislead us. God knows that any image that men make will necessarily be a distortion of who God really is and we will therefore end up trusting and worshipping a caricature instead of reality and that means our faith is in a cartoon and not the real thing. The crucifix

has historically encouraged people, as J. I. Packer says it, to “equate devotion with brooding over Christ’s bodily sufferings; it has made people morbid about the spiritual value of physical pain, and it has kept them from knowledge of the risen Savior.”⁸ This was one of my concerns with the film, *The Passion of the Christ* by Mel Gibson. It was a crucifix in moving pictures, portraying a very incomplete Jesus. Again from Packer: If you habitually picture God in your mind in some physical form “you will come to think of him and pray to him, as the image presents him. Thus you will in this sense bow down and worship your image; and to the extent to which the image fails to tell you the truth about God, to that extent you will fail to worship God in truth.”⁹

The 2^d Commandment intended to keep God’s people from creating an incomplete and inaccurate image of God until the true one came.

But we crave images. We say that we are a visual culture and we need pictures, images, to help us understand and connect not only with our minds but also with our hearts. But know that our culture doesn’t “hold a candle” to the visual culture of Moses’ day. People in that day couldn’t conceive of worship without images. As we have seen, the Israelites craved images to aid them in their worship. In response, God didn’t forbid all images; He just reserved the right to dictate what those images would be.

Throughout the Old Testament God gave images, but only faint and sketchy images to His people:

- in a burning bush,
- in a cloud of fire,

- in a “man” who wrestled with Jacob in the dark,
- in the back of God shown to Moses,
- in one “high and lifted up” on a throne to Isaiah,
- in the Tabernacle and Temple with their very precise sacrifices
- and in the witness of the law and prophets.

Oh, God gave images and I think we can demonstrate that all of these faint images pointed forward to the one true image that was to come. The 2nd Commandment intended to keep God’s people from creating an incomplete and inaccurate image of God until the true one came.

And then that image came. Jesus is that image God has given.

- Colossians 1:15 – *“He is **the image** (icon) of the invisible God.”*
- Hebrews 1:3 – *“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and **the exact representation** of his being.”*
- John 14:9 – *“Anyone who has seen me **has seen the Father.**”*
- John 1:18 – *“No one has ever seen God, but (the only begotten God - Jesus), who is at the Father’s side, **has made him known.**”*

Jesus is the only image that perfectly reveals God. But even when Jesus came people refused to recognize Him as God in the flesh. One man wrote, “The image God gave of himself in Jesus was an image of wealth hidden in poverty, of majesty hidden in humility, of glory veiled in sin-bearing love, of righteousness hidden in mercy. It was the image of a king in the form of a suffering servant. It was the image of a God who comes into the midst of sinful men to seek and save them—a God who loves and stoops and identifies

himself with sinners. But man in his wisdom simply said, How impossible, and how stupid! Men, in the presence of Jesus, wanted something more divine and sublime."¹⁰

Today we have the same reaction too often. We want something more sublime, more beautiful, and more awe-inspiring in our worship. We want to see God with our eyes. The British historian, Thomas Carlyle, is reported to have said, "I am only a poor man, but I can say in serious truth that I would give one third of all I possess for a veritable contemporaneous likeness of Christ...Had these carvers of marble chiseled a faithful statue of the Son of Man, as he called Himself, and showed us what manner of man he was like, what his height, what his build, and what the features of his sorrow-marked face were, and what his dress, I, for one, would have thanked the sculptor with the gratitude of my heart for that portrait, as the most precious heirloom of the ages."¹¹ Carlyle didn't understand that God has **faithfully** presented himself to us today. He has done so in His Word; in the faithful witness of the prophets and Apostles in the Old and New Testaments we have the portrait, the image of God, in His Son, that we need.

But God has also given us something else; He has given us tangible images. He has also left us the Christ-instituted images of baptism and the Lord's Supper. 40 years ago Ronald Wallace wrote, "We possess then, the image of God in the church today, not in pictures or carvings or photographic reproductions, but in the Bible account of historical witnesses, in the preaching that repeats and sets forth their witness, and in the Sacraments. We must remember that the living Christ honors this image with his Presence."¹² But today we have the same questions being asked that were asked 1800 years ago—how can we attract and communicate with people who are as visual as people are today, trained by television and movies? In our desire to be modern or even postmodern we must be careful.

Again from Wallace, "We must remember that it is easily and fatally possible for the church to be relevant to the modern mind and yet be without God, popular yet without God, solemn and religious without the presence of God. What shall it profit a church if it shall gain the whole world and lose its own soul?"¹³

So what will we do in our worship together as Southern Gables Church? How do we apply all of this to our worship? Let me first address permanent images: we will be very careful not to have any permanent images of God the Father, Son or Holy Spirit on our walls or otherwise displayed. I think this should extend to paintings or statues

God has faithfully presented himself to us in the faithful witness of the prophets and Apostles in the Old and New Testaments; we have the portrait, the image of God, in His Son.

of Jesus. Even though He appeared in human form, all our attempts at imaging Him will necessarily be faulty. Jewish scholar, Nahum Sarna, wrote, "In the Israelite view any symbolic representation of God (will) necessarily be both inadequate and a distortion, for an image becomes identified with what it represents and is soon looked upon as the place and presence of the Deity. In the end the image itself will become the locus of reverence and an object of worship, all of which constitutes the complete nullification of the singular essence of Israelite monotheism."¹⁴ The temptation to confuse that permanent image with the true God is too great. We begin to treat it as if it had spiritual power. We must avoid that: *"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them."*

So what about temporary images—pictures or other images that we show to aid in our worship? I think likewise we should be very careful even in our temporary, even fleeting, projection of images on our screens; careful not to represent the Father or the Spirit in physical form other than the ways the Bible does. Now because God chose to present Himself in visible form (pillar of fire, clouds, etc) and to represent aspects of His character by the use of metaphors which call forth mental images (father, husband, consuming fire, mother hen, etc), I offer that we may use those pictorial metaphors to illustrate aspects of God's

What matters when a congregation gathers for worship is one simple fact, the presence of the merciful God in the midst, through the Holy Spirit, as Jesus Christ incarnate, crucified and risen is set forth and offered to His people.

character. But again, to avoid the slippery slope into worshipping the image rather than God, we will use them only as fleeting pictures and not mount them on our walls or otherwise display them permanently.

But what about pictures of God the Son, Jesus? It seems that even in representing God the Son in physical form in temporary, fleeting, pictures shown in our classrooms or projected on our screens, we must be careful not to repeatedly stylize Him in one way, making Him fit our image of what we want Him to be instead of who He really is.

What of other pictures in our worship? Can we show pictures of the galaxy as we sing, "*the heavens declare the glory of God?*" While I think we may carefully use such pictures in our worship, we must still closely guard our

minds and hearts that we do not drift into investing some image, real or imagined, with what belongs to the invisible God alone. All of that said, I think we will agree that what we want more than anything else is for our worship to focus on the image that God has given us of Himself—the Lord Jesus Christ. No, that image is not given to us in sculptures or photographs of Him but He is given to us in the words of Scripture and in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. He must be our focus!

We want to worship the true God and not some warm fuzzy caricature of Him that we have created through pictures, light and sound like some Wizard of Oz. I close with these words from Ron Wallace, "What matters, then, when a congregation gathers for worship, is not the amount of religious excitement we can create, or the pious devotion we can stimulate by a display of imagery either through eloquence in word, or skill in manipulation, or by the creation of 'atmosphere' by music or color (or pictures). What matters is one simple fact, the presence of the merciful God in the midst, through the Holy Spirit, as Jesus Christ incarnate, crucified and risen is set forth and offered to his people... No matter how difficult the situation may be for the church in confronting the (present-day) mind and world, our policy in this matter must be decided not by anxiety but by faith in the Word of God."¹⁵

End Notes

- ¹ Other examples: 2 Kings 9:30-10:29; Judges 17; Numbers 21:6-9; 2 Kings 18:4 compared to Numbers 21:8-9; 1 Samuel 4:3.
- ² Phillip Ryken, pre-published *Exodus*, p. 576
- ³ Ibid, p. 569
- ⁴ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 40-41
- ⁵ Jan Lochman, *Signposts to Freedom*, p. 48
- ⁶ Packer, Ibid, p. 40,41
- ⁷ John Calvin, Institutes 1:10:12
- ⁸ Packer, Ibid, p. 41
- ⁹ Ibid, p. 41
- ¹⁰ Ronald S. Wallace, *Ten Commandments*, p. 45
- ¹¹ Ibid, p. 34
- ¹² Ibid, p. 36
- ¹³ Ibid, p. 48
- ¹⁴ Ryken, Ibid, p. 574
- ¹⁵ Wallace, Ibid, p. 48-9

Chapter Five

God's Reputation Exodus 20:7

In the introductory sermons to the Commandments, I emphasized that for the Christian the commands of God must be understood in the context of the grace of God. Exodus 19 and all that precedes it demonstrate that the grace of God forms the background for Exodus 20 and the commands of God. The indicative (what is) forms the basis of the imperative (you must). That is consistent with the New Testament emphasis—*"I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received."* (Ephesians 4:1)

Obedience to God's commands doesn't save us or keep us saved—it is the believer's response to grace. But obedience is the proof of the reality of God's grace in our lives. Therefore Christianity is concerned not only with salvation in the ultimate sense of "heaven when we die" but also with morality, ethics, Christ-like living—the life we are privileged to enjoy.

We are called to be a holy people not just a justified people. Paul, writing to believers wrote, *"Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord."* (Hebrews 12:14) James also said it: *"As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead."* (James 2:26) There are those who would say the commandments of God in the Old Testament are no longer binding on believers today because we are now under grace and commanded simply to "love." Terence Fretheim in his commentary on Exodus refutes that idea so well: "The will of God does not lose its particularity in the command to love; it simply opens up those particularities to limitless possibilities. Love always means going beyond

whatever laws may be articulated, but it needs their particularity for instruction purposes, charting something of what love may entail in specific situations.”¹

And so the believer’s motivation to obey is not simply fear but the much greater motivation of love—a love for God. And the negative formulations (the “You shall not’s!” of the Ten Commandments) indicate that God’s primary concern is not to create the Christian community, (He has already done that by His grace) but to **protect** His new community from behaviors that have the potential of destroying it. So along with many others, I have set forth at least four reasons for why we study and respond to the 10 Commandments today:

We affect God’s reputation among those around us. That is a sobering thought.

- They reflect the perfect character of God;
- They tell us how to reflect God’s character in our lives so that others may see the beauty of God in us;
- The commandments restrain sin in the society of church and world;
- And they drive us to Jesus for mercy to forgive us when we fall short, and grace to enable us to reflect His glory in our obedience.

Special Assistant to the President, Karl Rove, has been in the news a lot. Why? Mainly for one reason—his relationship to the President. Most of us wouldn’t even know of Karl Rove if it weren’t for that relationship. The point is that everything he does reflects on the President. Karl Rove affects the President’s reputation.

The CBS Sportsline on October 16, 2005 posted the following article:

“Minnesota Vikings owner Zygi Wilf is angry and embarrassed over accounts of drunkenness and sexual misbehavior by his players on a charter cruise, and said Friday the team will now have a conduct code. Wilf said, ‘I expressed my anger and I expressed my embarrassment, my embarrassment on behalf of my family and the people who work hard here.’” The actions of those players reflected on the owner of the team. Those players affect the Wilf family reputation.

We affect God’s reputation among those around us. That is a sobering thought. If God’s reputation depends on me, what will those around me think of Him? Asked more positively, “How can I represent God to those around me so that they will think of Him as highly as He deserves?” For me, these questions flow out of the 3rd Commandment: *“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”* (Exodus 20:7)

Now all of us know what this commandment is about, right? We know it’s about cursing—what we commonly call swearing. And the commandment says we are not to use God’s name in our cursing. So when we smash our thumb or a driver cuts us off in traffic we aren’t supposed to say “God...whatever!” Why not? What’s the big deal? We don’t mean anything by it. Well the Commandment certainly speaks to such language but it also means much more than that.

Let me explain by starting in a different place. Listen to this more literal translation of the 3rd Commandment, “You must not lift up the name of the LORD your God falsely/frivolously...” or “for nothingness.”² At least two things demand understanding in this verse:

- What is it we are not supposed to lift up falsely, frivolously or misuse? God’s name!

- What does it mean to lift up something falsely or to misuse it?

Let's begin with the first question. Quite explicitly it is the name of the LORD our God that we are not to misuse. For us a name is something we have but for God His name is who He IS.³ Obviously, I don't mean He is merely a name but that God's name expresses His very being, His essence. Now that is not totally foreign to us. We all identify very closely with our names. It hurts us when we hear our name identified with something objectionable, even when it isn't referring to us specifically. It bothers me a little that the host of the sleazy Jerry Springer television show bears my first name. We are even more offended when someone, with us in mind, uses our name in a mean-spirited joke or worse yet in a demeaning, derogatory way.

We so closely identify with our name that it stands for all we are. Much more, God's name communicates His very being—His creative power, His redeeming love, and His protecting promises. His name carries weight. Psalm 19:1 says, *"The heavens declare the glory of God."* Glory is a translation of the Hebrew "kabod" which means weight. The name of the LORD is weighty.⁴ Again, God's name represents all He is. So when we use that name, we are speaking of Him, whether we mean to be or not. And if we sense that our name is worthy of respect, how much more the name of the Holy Lord of the Universe who has saved us and will keep us forever as His own.

Look at the name we are talking about:

- *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."*(Genesis 1:1)
- *"How awesome is the LORD Most High, the great King over all the earth!"*(Psalm 47:2)
- *"Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his."*

*He changes times and seasons;
he sets up kings and deposes them.
He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to the discerning.
He reveals deep and hidden things;
he knows what lies in darkness,
and light dwells with him.”(Daniel 2:20-22)*

- *“Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is his faithfulness.”(Lamentations 3:22-23)*

God’s name communicates His very being—His creative power, His redeeming love, and His protecting promises. His name carries weight.

- *“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”
(Romans 5:8)*
- *“For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.”(Psalm 117:2)*
- *“I will never leave you nor forsake you.” “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”(Joshua 1:5 and Matthew 28:20)*

The name of God represents the very person of God. When we use the name, we are using Him, whether we mean to be or not.

Now the 2nd question we asked was: What does it mean to misuse the name of our God or to use it falsely or frivolously? I am going to suggest three words that encompass much of what it means to misuse God’s name:

1. Profanity
2. Perversity
3. Hypocrisy

I begin by mentioning profanity. As I said earlier, we have equated profanity with what we commonly call swearing. Profanity is the use of profane language. The verb “profane” means to take something that is holy or sacred, and treat it with contempt or even indifference.

How can we who are known by Him, loved by Him and kept by Him use His name in such vain, profane, frivolous, flippant, meaningless ways?

- We profane the Bible when we rip out its pages to start a fire on our camping trip.
- We profane the American flag when we use it to wipe our feet.
- We profane our mother when we disrespectfully call her “ma” or “our old lady.”

To profane something is to take it from its significant use and use it for common purposes.

We profane God; we use His name in vain, when we carelessly, thoughtlessly, flippantly use His name as if the name, and the person behind it, doesn’t represent anything important. So profanity is more than using God’s name in what we call swearing. Are not the following slogans a profane use of God’s name and work?

- T-shirt slogans “God is rad, He’s my dad” or
- “This blood’s for you.”

Or when we say "Praise the Lord" as an equivalent of "That's great" we use His name in a vain, empty way. Michael Horton wrote, "The casual use of God's name is prohibited precisely because it wears away our sensitivity to the enormous reverence we owe it."⁵

George MacDonald records the following conversation:

"Young Alister promised, 'In God's name we will!'

His mother responded, 'That is no occasion for an oath, Alister!'

But his brother defended him saying, 'Alister meant it very solemnly.'

To which his mother replied, 'Yes, but it was not necessary...The name of our Lord God should be as a precious jewel in the cabinet of our hearts, to be taken out only at great times and with loving awe.'⁶ Do we use God's name without seriousness? Do we use "Praise the Lord" as a cliché? Do we carelessly use God's name on our T-shirts or bumper stickers or in jokes? In this, the sin is much greater for a Christian who knows the real God than for someone who doesn't even think He exists. We begin to use God's name *as they do* in meaningless ways and thereby contribute to the idea that His name is meaningless and so is He.

How can we who are known by Him, loved by Him and kept by Him use His name in such vain, profane, frivolous, flippant, meaningless ways? Philippians 2:9-11 says,

"Therefore God exalted Jesus to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

We must not misuse the name of our LORD.

The second way I suggest we misuse the name of the LORD is by perversity. Perversity has to do with using a name incorrectly or improperly instead of the way it should be used. The most obvious example of that is when someone shouts in anger, "God damn you." What a perversion of God's name. Someone is using God's name to damn others when God's name is primarily connected to His redemption not damnation. He came to save the world, not condemn it. With those words, they have invoked God as an accomplice in an action that is completely contrary to God's intention. I remember from childhood when in anger toward my brother I would say, "Dad said..." when dad had said nothing of the kind. My father was especially incensed when we misrepresented him. Oh how careful we must be to not misrepresent God. It is a sober task to teach or preach or to counsel our children on what God does or does not say.

But the perversion goes beyond that.

- What about the business man who uses his religion to gain advantage in his sales?
- What about the politician who uses God's name to suggest the politician's sincerity or the rightness of his cause?
- What about the athlete who suggests that God is on his side or that his last touchdown was God's doing?
- What about the religious leader who claims that God told him or her such and such?
- What about the political activist who tries to make God a Republican or a Democrat, a Capitalist or a Socialist, or a hater of homosexuals or a lover of lesbians?

One man wrote, "In the past twenty years, God has been used to justify American nationalism, militarism, opposition

to child care for working mothers, and even such debatable issues as the retention of the Panama Canal. He has been used as a mascot for the conservative, white, middle-class establishment, the guarantor of such evangelical rights and family values as that of owning submachine guns. This smacks of using God..."⁷

Terence Fretheim wrote, "The name of God is commonly associated with empty phrase or easy religion or the latest ideology of a social or political sort. (God's) name thereby gets dragged down to the level of the contexts in which it is used. As people hear it so used, they may come to associate the name of God fundamentally with a cause they wish to avoid or reject. Consequently, they will not be drawn to this God and the name will not receive its due honor and respect."⁸

***Oh how careful we must be to not
misrepresent God.***

And what about we who pray asking God to bless our plans, our ambitions, or our goals? Jan Lochman wrote, "To misuse the name of God means, therefore, that instead of placing ourselves at God's disposal we place him at ours, domesticating his holy name for our unholy or pseudo-holy purposes...Nothing is more perverse than selfishness in the guise of religion; we try to make God the servant of our purely secular ambitions..."⁹ The perversion is in making God an accomplice in what is not His work or His goal.

"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God..."
(Exodus 20:7)

Lastly I must mention hypocrisy. And this is probably the greatest misuse of the name of the LORD, because misusing God's name also has to do with disobedience to God's will. Obedience and God's name are linked in Scripture:

- Deuteronomy 28:58-59 says, *"If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name—the LORD your God—the LORD will" discipline you.*
- Likewise Matthew 7:21 says, *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."*

To claim the name of God (to call ourselves Christians) and live oblivious to or contrary to His expressed will is to use His name in vain, as an empty word representing an empty God.

***Yahweh's name...must be honored,
blessed, praised, celebrated, invoked,
pronounced and so shared.***

When we become a Christian we take God's name, just as a wife takes her husband's name. If she breaks the covenant of marriage, she has taken her husband's name in vain. If we profess Christ and are insincere in our talk and disobedient in our walk we take Christ's name in vain. For a man or woman to claim Christ's name but not increasingly leave their sinful ways is hypocrisy and it profanes that name. We claim the name of God but disregard His lifestyle commands, neglect the study of His word, pray only sporadically and selfishly, or meet with God's people only when convenient.

Clarence Jordan said, "We take it (the name of God) and on we go and it means nothing. We keep sailing under the same old banner, living the same old life, having the same old attitudes, and walking the same old way. The name has meant nothing to us. It doesn't change us. (Understand)

you don't (most of all) take the name of the Lord in vain with your lips. You take it in vain with your life. It's the people...whose lives are totally unchanged by the grace of God. They're the ones who take the name in vain."¹⁰

This misuse of God's name, this hypocrisy, extends to our worship:

- Do we sing His name, pray His name and otherwise pretend to belong to Him, bearing His name, but insincerely?
- Do we go through the motions of worship using God's name thoughtlessly?
- Do we sing about His great work and person without meaning?
- When we worship and use God's name are we doing so with sincerity and reverence?

John Durham wrote, "Yahweh's name...must be honored, blessed, praised, celebrated, invoked, pronounced and so shared. To treat Yahweh's name with disrespect is to treat his gift lightly, to undermine his power, to scorn his Presence, and to misrepresent to the family of humankind his very nature as 'The One Who Always Is.' "¹¹

I began by asking about God's reputation. What is His reputation among those who know us as Christians? The Apostle Paul wrote, in one of the worst indictments imaginable: "*God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.*" (Romans 2:24) He said it more positively to Titus 2:5: We are to act righteously "*so that no one will malign the word of God.*"

The story is told of a young soldier who was taken to Alexander the Great for trial for misconduct. Three times the General asked the young soldier his name and all three times the young man answered that his name was also "Alexander." The third time, the General warned him to

either change his name or change his conduct. Atheist, Frederick Nietzsche said that he could believe in the Redeemer (Jesus) if Christians would look more redeemed. Puritan writer Stephen Charnock wrote, "It is a sad thing to be Christians (in church), heathens in our shops and devils in our closets (private acts)." Our hypocrisy misuses, profanes, the name of the LORD our God.

What is the opposite of misusing God's name?

- It is to take His name seriously and thus to take Him seriously.
- It is to take His commands seriously.
- It is to use His name only seriously.
- It is to live our lives seriously.

Is God's reputation rightly reflected in my life and my words? Michael Horton said, "May Christian politicians in our day speak for the weak...May Christian educators execute their calling with excellence...May Christian business people carry out their honorable vocation with uncommon dignity, integrity, and respect for their clients, consumers, employees and employers. Let Christians become widely known again as the best workers an employer could hire, and let homemakers and home builders set their compass toward creating dynasties of faith, their children taking their own places in society as salt and light...Let us long for the day when God's name is no longer blasphemed among the Gentiles because of us."¹²

In Marie Chappian's book *Of Whom the World Was Not Worthy* there is a marvelous story that I've told before. In the former Yugoslavia there was an evangelist by the name of Jakov who met a man named Cimmerman in one of the towns. He befriended Cimmerman and tried to tell him of Jesus' love for him. Cimmerman abruptly interrupted Jakov and told him he wanted to hear nothing more about it.

“Christianity” for Cimmerman carried a very different meaning. He spoke of the past when in the name of Christianity some had come to their town and amidst much plundering and killing had even killed his own nephew. Jakov was distressed over how he could get Cimmerman to understand that those who had done so much wrong were not truly Christ-followers. He said to Cimmerman, “Suppose I was to steal your coat and then wearing it, were to rob a bank. Suppose further, the police saw me in the distance, not recognizing me but recognizing your coat. What would you say to them if they came to your house and accused you of robbing the bank?”

“Well I would deny it,” said Cimmerman.

“Ah, but we saw your coat,” they would say. This analogy annoyed Cimmerman. Jakov would return from time to time to that village and each time would look for Cimmerman, befriending him, encouraging him and sharing with him the love of Christ without mentioning Jesus’ name.

Finally one day, months later, Cimmerman asked Jakov, “How does one become a Christian?” Jakov was delighted and led him to repent and believe. Cimmerman bowed his knees and surrendered his life to Christ. As he rose to his feet he turned to Jakov, embraced him and said, “Thank you for being in my life.” Then pointing skyward he said, “You wear His coat well.”

We bear God’s name. What is His reputation among those who know us? Exodus 20:7 says, *“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for God will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”*

End Notes

¹ Terence Fretheim, *Exodus*, p. 223

² Herbert Huffmon in William Brown (editor) *The Ten Commandments*, p. 207 and Ryken, pre-published *Exodus*, on 3rd Command.

³ Ibid

⁴ J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 97

⁵ Michael Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom*, p. 104

⁶ Cited in Boers *Lord Teach us to Pray*, p. 59 from MacDonald's *The Highlanders' Last Song* p. 113. GLN used this illustration in his sermon on the Lord's Prayer "Father, Make Your Name Holy"

⁷ Horton, *Ibid*, p. 101

⁸ Fretheim, *Ibid*, p. 228

⁹ Jan Lochman, *Signposts to Freedom*, p. 55

¹⁰ Clarence Jordan, *The Substance of Faith*, p. 134

¹¹ John Durham, *Exodus*, p. 288

¹² Horton, *Ibid*, p. 110

Chapter Six

Keeping the Sabbath Holy Exodus 20:8-11

Even within the past 50 years, in many Christian churches and homes, there were certain things you couldn't do because it was Sunday. Sunday was a day to stop work and give the day to worship, to fellowship, or to helping the sick and poor. It was not a day for fixing things around the house or even for recreation. I have told you before the story of my father deciding to not harvest hay on a Sunday even though it meant a financial loss. I remember discussions of whether playing ball on Sunday was okay or not—incidentally my parents decided it was fine.

- Most of you know that even today in Denver, car-dealerships are closed on Sundays.
- Not that long ago most stores were closed on Sunday.
- Even today in 2005, Bergen County, New Jersey, hosting one of the largest shopping areas near to New York City, is completely closed on Sundays.

The first law prohibiting work and commerce on Sunday was issued by The Christian Emperor Constantine in A.D. 321: "Let all judges and all city people and all tradesmen rest upon the venerable day of the sun..."¹

Today, in huge contrast, with some seemingly quaint exceptions, hardly anyone suggests that Sunday be treated as different than any other day of the week. Oh Christians may like a day off, but Sunday is not observed primarily because it is the Sabbath but because it allows freedom to do as we choose. God says in Exodus 20:8-11, "*Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor*

and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

Why do you think God commanded His people to observe one day in seven as a day of rest from work?

- Was it because God needed the attention that they would give Him on that day?
- Was it because God wanted to make life hard for people by restricting the time they could work to make a living?
- Was it because God wanted to make one day in seven miserable for active boys? Of course not.

Instead of living by grace through faith in God they turned Sabbath into a merit system.

At creation itself, God established a rhythm He knew human beings needed. It was for the welfare of people that God created the Sabbath. Sabbath keeping was not punitive but liberating.

So what about the Sabbath? Many Christians consider the 4th commandment about remembering the Sabbath to be irrelevant.

- Some will point out that the 4th commandment is not specifically reiterated in the New Testament even though the other nine are. Honoring parents is reiterated in the New Testament. Stealing, murder,

adultery, covetousness, and the rest of the commandments are spoken about in the New Testament—all except Sabbath-keeping.²

- Others will say that Jesus fulfilled the law so that Sabbath keeping is done.
- Still others will note that Jesus and Paul repeatedly criticized the legalism that had attached itself to Sabbath keeping.
- New Testament writers certainly emphasize that in Christ we live under grace.
- And some people couple those ideas and conclude that the 4th commandment is a non-issue.

Is that right? Is Sabbath keeping irrelevant to us as believers?

By the time Jesus was here on earth, the Jews had made Sabbath a burden to the people rather than liberating as God intended. They had determined 39 categories of activities that they said were prohibited by the 4th commandment. Those prohibited activities included: Plowing, grinding, baking, weaving, sewing stitches, writing more than one letter, kindling a fire, or carrying anything for a distance of more than a certain number of feet.³ The legalists of Jesus' day were upset that His disciples picked some heads of grain to eat on Sabbath. (Mark 2) They were angry with Jesus because on the Sabbath He healed a man with a shriveled hand. (Mark 3) The Jews had turned the law of Sabbath into **legalism**. They took the commands of God, given for the welfare of His people, and turned them into a way to earn God's favor or incur His wrath. Instead of living by grace through faith in God they turned Sabbath into a merit system.

It is no wonder that the average Jew vacillated between legalism and libertarianism—between precision in

attempting to keep every law perfectly or giving up and doing whatever they wanted to do. Jesus repeatedly challenged that legalism but never by breaking His own commandments—the commandments of God. He challenged the misuse of the law, not the law.

Through the centuries since Jesus' resurrection, people have struggled with how the 4th commandment applies to Christians. As I said earlier, some simply dismissed the commandment. But others, seeing the validity of God's gracious laws for the good of His people, attempted to apply Sabbath to Christians.

By the 17th Century, some, in spite of their good motivations and contrary intentions, had turned Sabbath keeping once again into legalism. In 1668, as one example, John Wells, a devout Christ-follower and church-leader wrote an 800-page book on what to do and not do on the Sabbath. One chapter is titled, "A plea with Christians to out vie the Jews in Sabbath-holiness and observations."⁴

That kind of thinking prevailed in a large segment of the Christian church especially in England and America. As much as I love the Westminster Catechism I take exception to its near-legalism when it says in answer to questions 60: "The Sabbath is to be sanctified by a holy resting all that day, even from such worldly employments and recreations as are lawful on other days; and spending the whole time in the public and private exercises of God's worship, except for works of necessity and mercy." Not bad ideas to be sure, but so specific as to create an air of legalism. It is no wonder that the average Christian vacillated between legalism and libertarianism—between attempting to keep the law perfectly or giving up and throwing it all over. And overwhelmingly in our Christian culture, libertarianism has prevailed.

Today Sabbath keeping is largely a non-issue. Does anyone still ask what is permissible in observing the Sabbath? Does

anyone still ask what might be dishonoring to God on the Sabbath? I think not.

- No one any longer asks if working is okay on Sunday.
- No one asks if buying or selling is okay on Sunday
- No one asks if sports are okay for Sunday.
- Few ask if meeting with God's people for worship is more important than other activities.

Vacations, spectator sports, youth sports leagues, hunting, fishing, fund-raising events, community events or you-name-it, are perceived as equally legitimate uses of Sunday—equal to worship.

Today Sabbath keeping is largely a non-issue. Does anyone still ask what might be dishonoring to God on the Sabbath?

What happened? Does it honor God and is it faithful to His Word for us to throw the baby of Sabbath out with the bathwater of legalism? Some think that Sabbath is a uniquely Jewish concept that was abrogated when Jesus came. It is true that the 4th Commandment of Sabbath keeping is not specifically restated in the New Testament. But what is often overlooked is that Jesus observed the Sabbath, His disciples observed the Sabbath, and, until they were kicked out of the synagogues years later, all subsequent Jewish-Christians observed the Sabbath. And just as importantly, nowhere does the New Testament even suggest that Sabbath keeping is no longer important. It seems that the burden of proof would be on those who suggest that one of the Ten Commandments of God is no longer as important. James Dennison wrote, "A moral law once delivered is perpetually obligatory until expressly repealed. The silence of the New Testament is a

confirmation of the Sabbath, not an abrogation thereof.”⁵

One of the confusing issues for Christians who still think of Sunday as special is that for nearly 2000 years Christians have observed Sunday as the day of worship rather than Saturday as the Jews did and still do. What is confusing about this is that we have tied the Sabbath concept inextricably to Saturday—we have equated Sabbath with Saturday. We commonly say that the Jews observe Sabbath and we observe Sunday. But Sabbath does not mean Saturday; it means, “rest” or “ceasing.”

The author of the New Testament, the Holy Spirit Himself, gives Sunday the title of "The Lord's Day" – a day belonging to the Lord in ways that other days don't.

God established the 7th day as the day of Sabbath (“ceasing”) but He did not say that day had to be Saturday. The Bible does not say that the 7th day was Saturday. Just because somewhere in history-past the Jews chose to call Saturday the 7th day and then observe Sabbath on it, we easily think of Saturday and Sabbath as the same but they are not. God’s command was not about Saturday Sabbath but about making one-day-in-seven, special to Him. There was nothing wrong with the Jews making that one-day-in-seven, Saturday, but the Bible does not say it had to be what we call Saturday. But whichever day it is, Sabbath as a one-day-in-seven, holy to the Lord, is a practice instituted by God that has as much bearing on God’s people today as on God’s people in Moses’ day. Jonathan Edwards considered the one-day-in-seven as morally binding because it was set at creation and ratified in the Ten Commandments.⁶

I wish to take a minute to show that Sunday became that special one-day-in-seven for Christians. As early as

immediately after the Resurrection, the disciples were meeting on, what was commonly called, the first day of the week (Sunday).

- *"On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them."*(John 20:19)
- *They met again on Sunday.* (John 20:26)
- *"On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people."*(Acts 20:7)
- *"Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money..."*(1 Corinthians 16:1-2)

This is not to suggest that God commands worship on **Sunday** but only to show that very early in church history Sunday worship became the practice. In fact it was so much the practice that by the time John wrote the book of Revelation, within 50 years of the Resurrection, he refers to that weekly day of worship as "The Lord's Day." (Revelation 1:10) It was called the "Lord's Day" because it was the day of the week on which Jesus was powerfully shown to be the sovereign Lord by His resurrection. J. Bauckham writes, "(Sunday) was simply, by the normative custom of the apostolic church, the day on which Christians met to worship, and, for us, the use of its title, 'The Lord's Day,' in Revelation 1:10 gives that custom the stamp of (biblical) authority."⁷ In other words, the author of the New Testament, the Holy Spirit Himself, gives Sunday the title of "The Lord's Day"—a day belonging to the Lord in ways that other days don't.

And as soon as it was legally possible, under the Christian Emperor Constantine, in A.D. 321, Sunday was given special status by the government and people were allowed

to cease working on that day. It is no wonder then that eventually Sunday became known as the Christian's Sabbath. It is true that Sunday is never commanded as the Sabbath day for Christians but precedence alone is as instructive for us as the centuries of Saturday Sabbath was for Jews. But more importantly, the Sunday Resurrection of Jesus and the Bible's reference to Sunday as "The Lord's Day" make a strong case for observing Sunday as the Christian Sabbath. One-day-in-seven is God's gracious instruction and Sunday is both the meaningful and practical application of that instruction. It is meaningful because it is Resurrection day. It is practical because, as much as possible, we need to select one day for God's people to gather rather than everyone selecting his or her own day.

So what does all this mean for us? It means that we must not run to the extremes of either legalism or libertarianism. As to legalism, to say that we must set aside one-day-in-seven as holy to the Lord does not mean that by doing so we earn God's grace.

- You will never be more loved by God because you keep the commands of God.
- You will never be more condemned by God because you fail to keep the commands of God.
- You are loved by grace, not by your precise observance of certain commands.
- God accepts you because Christ fulfilled the perfect law of God not because you keep the law.

But knowing that does not mean that we run to libertarianism; that we ignore God's gracious instruction in the commandments. Or as Paul asked it in Romans 6:15, *"Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!"*

So how do we respond to God's command of a one-day-in-

seven Sabbath? What did God say? **"Remember** the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." (Exodus 20:8)

- "Remember" means "observe without lapse; hold as a present and continuing priority."⁸
- "Remember" not as in merely mentally recalling but doing something about it.

Foolish is the man who says he remembers this is his wedding anniversary but does nothing more.

So how do we remember it? We remember by "keeping it holy." "Keeping it holy" means to set it apart as different and differently used than other days. The very word "Sabbath" gives us understanding. As I said earlier, the word means "cease," "rest," or stop. Exodus 20:9-10a says, *"Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God."* The 7th day is a "ceasing," a "resting."

One-day-in-seven is God's gracious instruction and Sunday is both the meaningful and practical application of that instruction.

What are we to cease? We are to cease laboring/working. But what constitutes work or labor is not specified here. Oh, there were a couple of times in Israel's subsequent history that they had apparently so egregiously violated the spirit of God's law that specific illustrations of what they were not to do were given. (See Jeremiah 17:22,24) But by and large they and we are not told specifically what we are not to do. I think that is very intentional. God wants us to enter into His commands with an attitude of love for Him not legalist fear of Him. If we desire to please Him we will seek to act in ways that we think will please Him. And because we know He loves us, we can be assured that if

we are seeking to please Him, even our poor attempts will be met with approval and encouragement. We aren't looking for what we can get away with; we are looking for how we can personally make this day holy to the Lord.

We ask what we can do to make it special. To make it special we look at what God says about the Sabbath. In Exodus 20:11 He says, *"For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. **Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.**"*

God will take care of us. We don't need to work seven days a week to make ends meet. We can trust Him.

So first of all, Sabbath was a celebration of creation. God made order out of chaos at creation and He continues to do that in our lives at all times. The week of six days of work with one additional day of ceasing work is the creation pattern. Not only were six days needed but also all seven were needed and specifically the 7th day brought something to creation that the first six did not. Sabbath keeping is part of creating order out of chaos. To work all of the time is to return to chaos—witness the rat race of so many. One author noted, "Sabbath keeping puts all human striving aside, recognizes the decisive role of God in creation, and provides for a weekly oasis to rest back in the arms of this reality."⁹

- In Sabbath keeping, in "ceasing," I take time to reflect on God, the Creator and my Creator.
- In "stopping," I stop long enough to take stock of my life as lived in His care.
- I revel in His benevolent sovereignty.
- I enjoy what He has created.

- I stop to enjoy the day, to enjoy His people, to rest in His love.

But there is more. In Deuteronomy 5:15 after repeating the 4th commandment, Moses adds, *"Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day."* So Sabbath is also a commemoration of deliverance—of being set free. In Egypt, Israel was condemned to 24-7 forced labor. Moses requested time for worship but Pharaoh rejected the idea. But God, on behalf of His people, would not be denied. He delivered His people and set them free to work and cease working, to labor and to worship. Sabbath keeping is a testimony to God's deliverance of Israel and us.

God will take care of us. We don't need to work seven days a week to make ends meet. We can trust Him. And when God says no one, not even servants or your animals are to work, it is to show the same humanitarian concern for those around us that God has shown to us; allow them the same ceasing to celebrate creation and deliverance that we enjoy. Sabbath rest is not a burden but a gift to the world.

Listen to Isaiah's reflection on Sabbath keeping:

"If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob. The mouth of the LORD has spoken." (Isaiah 58:13-14)

The Sabbath was a delight.

Some say Sabbath keeping is boring. I love James Dennison's response: "What is boring about setting aside one whole day to delight in the Lord Jesus Christ; what is boring about sequestering one day to enjoy the sweet presence of Christ in public, family and private worship; what is boring about sanctifying one day in teaching one's children the way of salvation, in opening the Scriptures to them at home, in dealing tenderly, lovingly, personally with their souls; what is boring about setting aside one day to visit and pray over the sick, to comfort and relieve the poor, to sit beside the lonely, to minister consolation to the bereaved, to join in warm fellowship with other Christians?"¹⁰

But Sabbath keeping was not only for ceasing but it was also for acting. God ceased working on the 7th day but He didn't stop acting. In Leviticus 23:3 we read, "*There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the LORD.*" This day is to be consecrated to the Lord.

In the Bible, Sabbath is filled with praising the Lord (Psalm 92), with special sacrifices (Numbers 28:9-10), with gathering for religious purposes (Leviticus 23:7-8), and for reading and studying God's word (Luke 4:16-21; Mark 6:2). In the New Testament, as God's people gathered together,

- they prayed,
- they worshipped,
- they gave to meet the needs of others,
- they gave to carry on missionary activity in other places, and
- they fellowshiped and encouraged each other in their faith.

The joy of the Sabbath was not just in not working but also

in rejoicing in the Lord—hence fellowship and worship naturally followed in the day of rest. That’s why the letter to the Hebrews urges us: *“Do not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another...”*(10:25)

All of that said, I know that some of you are waiting for me to spell out what is and what is not acceptable on the Christian Sabbath. You will wait a long time. God didn’t do it and I won’t either. Yes, God says “cease” labor and work, but God gives us reasons more than specifics because He wants our hearts not just our compliance. Too many of us think of Sunday as a day off but we don’t couple that with our need for intimacy with God and God’s desire to meet with us to spend time with us. Simply changing the activity from required employment to selfish enjoyment doesn’t

The joy of the Sabbath was not just in not working but also in rejoicing in the Lord—hence fellowship and worship naturally followed in the day of rest.

meet the intent of Sabbath rest. Many of us take time off of work but we don’t complete the creation cycle with a Sabbath—we don’t find rest for the soul. Intimacy with God like intimacy with another person requires time.

St. Augustine wrote, in that well-known statement, “You have made us for yourself (God), and our hearts are restless until they find rest in You.” This speaks to the need for a person to have something more than just cessation from employment—true rest for the soul. Many take time off of work only to fill that time fuller with other activities that only further bleed the soul. In this regard, Abraham Heschel wrote, “He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering

commerce, of being yoked to toil. He must go away from the screech of dissonant days, from the nervousness and fury of acquisition and the betrayal of embezzling his own life. He must say farewell to manual work and learn to understand that the world has already been created and will survive without the help of man. Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our souls belong to Someone Else."¹¹

Sabbath—God commanded it because He loves us. Will we respond?

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." (Exodus 20:8-11)

I close with this from a most helpful book entitled *Keeping Sabbath Wholly*, by Marva Dawn.

"Sabbath is for:

"The busy people who need to work from a cohesive, unfragmented self;

"For social activists, who need a cycle of worship and action;

"For those who chase after fulfillment and need to understand their deepest yearnings and to hear the silence;

"Sabbath is for those who have lost their ability to play because of the materialism and technologization of our society—who need beauty and gaiety and delight;

“For those who have lost passion and need to get in touch with feelings; those who are alone and need emotional nourishment;

“For those who cannot find their life’s priorities and need a new perspective;

“Sabbath is for those who think the future is dictated by the present, who need hope and visions of the future to change the present order;

“It is for those who are disgusted with dry, empty, formalistic worship and want to love and adore God;

“And Sabbath is for those who want to be God’s instruments, enabled and empowered by the Spirit to be world changers.”¹²

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy”

End Notes

¹ Wikipedia.org

² See Romans 14:5-8, Galatians 4:10, Colossians 2:16-17

³ Wikipedia.org

⁴ James Bauckham in D.A. Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, p.327

⁵ James Dennison in R.C. Sproul, *Soli Deo Gloria*, p. 152

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *Works, IV*, p. 620ff

⁷ Bauckham in D.A. Carson, *Ibid*, p. 240

⁸ John Durham, *Exodus*, p. 289

⁹ Terrance Fretheim, *Exodus*, p. 230

¹⁰ Dennison in R.C. Sproul, *Ibid*, p. 152

¹¹ Abraham Heschel "A Palace in Time" in *The Ten Commandments*
William Brown (Editor), p. 214

¹² Marva Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, Dedication page

Chapter Seven

Honor your Father and Mother

Presented by Dr. Rich Peterson

"If Christ is in you, your spirit is alive because of righteousness. If the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he will also give life to your mortal bodies through his spirit who lives in you. If by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. Because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God."

That last phrase, "those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God," may or may not reveal itself in me this morning.

We have a joke around our house that Cynthia, my wife, loses things often. They are usually small things like her car keys that she's misplaced, or perhaps her purse, that's not in the car but it's in the living room or dining room. Sometimes she'll lose credit cards, which becomes a little concerning. But usually she'll find them. But when I lose something, it's rather large. So when I lost my sermon manuscript, that was a rather large loss.

So we, as they used to say, we sort of preach "without a net." There just wasn't enough time to reconstruct the entire thing from beginning to end. But truly, I hope that through what God has done in my life. He will do for you through the power of His Spirit.

My best friend's dad died a week ago. He was in the room with his father when at 1:40 in the morning, his dad simply slipped from this earth to heaven. And he was there with his teenage son. It was a sweet moment for Jon. Sweet, he said, because he was surrounded by the most important

men in his life—his father, whom he watched move from this reality to the greater reality of heaven, and his son, whom he watched move that night at the bedside of his grandfather from boyhood to manhood.

But absent from that scene was Jon's brother, the other son. Absent not because of his inability but because of his unwillingness to be there. When called earlier in the week about his father's dire condition, the other son simply said, "I am really too busy to come at this particular time. Jon, if you would take care of the details, I will back you on whatever decision you need to make."

What does honoring look like? It means that we must respect and love God so that we will neither look down on our parents or superiors nor irritate them but will honor them, serve them, obey them, love them and value them.

When called with the information that his father had passed away, the other son simply said, "When is the funeral going to be?" and when finding that it was going to be sooner than later, he requested that it might be postponed because he was terribly, terribly busy.

In our text we come to the fifth commandment. "*Honor your father and mother,*" Exodus 20:12 tells us, and then it goes on to say "*that you may live long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.*" I think that the story of my best friend and his brother illustrates what honoring one's father and mother looks like and what it doesn't look like.

Jon lived close to his family throughout his entire adult life because he wanted to be there to care for them as they aged and be there when they died. His brother lived very far away for those same reasons. Jon made intentional decisions in his life to remain near his parents so that he

could continue to care for them and continue to serve them as they aged and now as his father passed away. His brother lives miles away because he really wanted to have nothing to do with his parents.

Honor your father and your mother. Honor. You see, honor is something that we don't hear or see much of in our day and time any more. We don't see it played out in flesh and blood examples. And so the example of Jon tends to show us what honoring one's parents looks like.

"Honor your father and mother so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you." What does this mean? Well, according to Martin Luther, in his Small Catechism, it means that we must respect and love God so that we will neither look down on our parents or superiors nor irritate them but will honor them, serve them, obey them, love them and value them. It's pretty clear-cut in terms of what the meaning of honoring one's father and mother looks like.

But what I'd like to address also is how we go about that in the various stages of life. You see, it seemed rather interesting to me to have to preach a sermon on honoring one's father and mother to a group of people that represent a diversity of life stages. In other words, I had to ask the question, to whom will I preach this sermon? Will I preach it to young children? Do I address it to adolescents, or do I address it to young adults? Do I address it to adults who are still engaged in life where their parents are still alive? Do I address it to those of you with aging and elderly and even ill parents? And so it occurred to me that because each of us is at a different stage in life, that this sermon on honoring one's father and mother will be heard a little differently depending upon where you are in life's circumstance.

"Honor your father and mother."

First, that's an address not just to the adults in our congregation. It is simply that which we would tell our children. Honor your father and mother. How best is this accomplished as young children, as minors? The best way that we are to honor our parents as young children and minors is through obedience. Turn to Ephesians 6:1-3. This is Paul addressing the community at Ephesus and he writes: *"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother'—which is the first commandment with a promise—that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."*

Here is what we as young children and minors are to do to best honor our parents. We are simply to obey them. Why? Well, the Apostle Paul does something extraordinary in the fact that he even addresses children within the greater complexity of the Christian community in the church at Ephesus. He addresses them particularly and what it shows to us is that this early Church situation is already taking very seriously the role model to which Jesus Christ Himself gave in hindering not the little children coming unto Him. They took seriously the fact that there would be children who would come to know the Lord Jesus Christ in a personal way and that Paul then could address them particularly. He could address them specifically as to what their responsibility was as they sought to honor their father and their mother. They are to obey.

But why are they to obey? Well he says simply that they are to obey because this is right. Something in terms of human ability to understand natural law would indicate that there is a rightness with regard to parental authority. Every stable society has depended upon the parental authority of mother and father to direct the lives of their children.

John Stott said it this way. "It was a radical and very different approach to dealing with children in culture. That

the Christians would even address children is a radical thing indeed. It's radical in its change from the callous cruelty which prevailed in the Roman Empire in which unwanted babies were abandoned, weak and deformed ones killed, and even healthy children were regarded by many as a partial nuisance because they inhibited sexual promiscuity and complicated divorce."

Children are taken seriously within the Christian community and they are to obey their parents because this is right. Every society that sees the undoing of its families, sees the instability of a culture and it sees as its families are destroyed, a culture and finally a civilization that is destroyed as well. Children, obey your parents for this is right. So it's not only because of natural law that Paul addresses children here, he also directs our attention to this fifth commandment. He says it this way, taking a combination of that which is shared in Exodus and that which is shared in Deuteronomy, "*Honor your father and mother—which is the first commandment with a promise—that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.*"

The best way that we are to honor our parents as young children and minors is through obedience.

Another reason that children are to obey their parents is because it is God's law, God's commandment to us. What's interesting is that the Jewish people in ancient Israel believed that the two stone tablets had five commandments on each and that you will notice then that this fifth commandment is on the first tablet of stone that has more to do with our duty to God than it does our duty to neighbors. It points to the fact that as we honor our parents we are actually honoring God. And this is especially

true as children because in the eyes of children, parents represent God to us. They represent His authority and His love.

Paul mentions that it is a commandment with a promise. So rather than referencing a negative statement of this same commandment, which is done in places in Deuteronomy and Exodus, where it talks about cursed is the man or the woman who does not honor father and mother, Paul emphasizes a positive. He reminds each of us that it is a commandment, the first with a promise. And the promise is that we would experience a degree of longevity and a

We love and we are loved and we are obedient because of that love.

degree of prosperity. Does this mean that every child who is obedient to parents will live a long and prosperous life? This is probably not what it means. According to John Stott, we should interpret that particular passage of scripture in general rather than individual terms. Then what is promised is not so much long life to every child who obeys his parents, as much as it pertains to the social stability of communities in which children honor their parents. In other words, a long lasting sense of prosperity to a culture that has found a way to honor their parents. What's interesting is that even as individuals we see that there is a degree of prosperity given to each of us who will obey our parents. As children, it keeps us safe. As children, it keeps us secure; it keeps us from going out of bounds and living life in those dangerous places, as we are obedient to our parents.

So Paul says, "*Children, obey your parents for it is right and because it is God's command.*" But then probably the most significant reason that he gives for children to be obedient to parents has to do with the transformed life that is theirs through Jesus Christ. It is the Gospel. He says it right away,

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord." And because he is addressing Christian children, he is changing the motivation for obedience. Obedience now is no longer drudgery that one fulfills to an autocratic leader of mother and father, but now obedience comes from the inner motivation of love. Jesus said, *"You love me if you keep my commandments. If you keep my commandments, you love me."* We love and we are loved and we are obedient because of that love.

I promise I won't tell any exaggerated stories from my childhood but I think it would be safe to say that I was a rather easy child to raise. I didn't step out of bounds very often. I wasn't intentionally disobedient very often. I wasn't a perfect child by any means, but I was close. No, the reason that I wanted so desperately to be obedient to my parents was because I knew I was unconditionally loved by them. I didn't want to do those things that would be heartbreaking to my parents because of my love for them and their love for me. It was an easy thing most days and in most ways for me to be obedient to my parents. Children show their honor to their parents best through obedience.

But then we move through life's stages. And the next stage that we see is one of adolescence. I would like you to turn to another story that I think addresses adolescence and its struggle. It is found in Luke 2:41. If children best honor their parents through obedience, I believe that adolescents and early adults best honor their parents through a questioning process and even a breaking away from their own mother and father. Look at this story from Luke chapter two that talks to us about the development of Jesus as he moved from baby to child to a young man in Luke chapter two.

"Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was

over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, 'Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.' 'Why were you searching for me?' he asked. 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he was saying to them. Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."

I want you to notice the universal struggle between those who have teenagers in their home then and now. You see, becoming an adult, moving through adolescence into young adulthood, is never an easy thing and the good news for us here is that it wasn't easy for Jesus or his family either. The universal question of those who have teenagers in their home, "Son, why have you treated us like this?" The universal answer of every teenager to begin every statement they make with this question "Why?" You see Jesus asking that question of his parents and then the universal plight of every parent who has a teenager living in their home—they did not understand what he was saying to them. You live there don't you? Some of you. Jesus is beginning to break away. He's beginning to ask questions, questions that are important in later adolescence and early adulthood. He's beginning to ask questions of importance emotionally, physically, relationally and spiritually and He's

beginning to look for His true parent. And as He does, He begins to ask questions of His earthly parents. It's not that He's disobedient to them but He is beginning to break away from them in some measure and in some degree. The Bible tells us that He continued to be obedient to them.

And then there's another picture of Jesus later on when His mom and his brothers and sisters come to kind of rescue Him from a dangerous situation and He simply asks the crowd, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" And what you see in a clearer fashion, as a young adult is Jesus breaking away from His mother, in this case, for His father is already deceased, and He begins to become the person that God has created Him to be.

"Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"

Here Jesus is asking and making statements that cause us to become aware of His own realization that He is unique in the eyes of God. He, of course, is the Messiah. He, of course, is the Son of God. But the questions that we ask in late adolescence and early adulthood point to our asking questions as to what we will do with our life. How will we operate and what kinds of decisions and responsibilities will be ours in adulthood and we begin then to break away from our parents.

It sounds almost as though we are disobedient, but I believe that the best way that late adolescents and early adults can honor their father and mother is by becoming the adult God created them to be.

Again, my own life. I left for seminary when I was 22 years of age. I had lived with my parents that whole time. So the day I packed up my little Dodge Colt with all of my earthly possessions to drive away to the foreign land (for me)

called Texas, I remember my parents saying to me, "Rich, if you ever need to come back home, you can." And as I drove away I remember thinking to myself that the best way I could honor my father and my mother was if I never had to. They had prepared me well. They had prepared me for every opportunity and all the responsibilities of adulthood. They had set me free. I could honor them through the life that I would now live as an adult.

But then finally as we move through life, we move from childhood to late adolescence to young adulthood to a wonderful time in which as adults we relate to our parents as equals, we relate to them as friends, where they are honoring us as much as we are honoring them.

There is a dignity which is theirs as parents that you give them when you acknowledge who they have been to you throughout your life.

We even move to a phase in life in which my friend, Jon, found himself to be, a place where our parents are aging and where perhaps they are elderly and ill. What are we then to do? How are we then to honor them best? We honor them in the best way possible by caring service.

We care for them and we serve them. That could look like a thousand different ways—one or the other not being any more right but we find ways through the empowerment of the Spirit of God to serve in caring and compassionate ways our elderly parents.

Someone has said, sometimes it is a time in which our parents become like children and we become like their parents. To which a nurse who works often with elderly said, "No, it's never like that. Your parents may become childlike, but they are always and must always remain, and you honor them by this, your parents."

There is a dignity which is theirs as parents, childlike as they may be, that you give them when you acknowledge who they have been to you throughout your life: a parent.

Oh, it's different from early childhood, it's different from adolescence and young adulthood, but it is a relationship which God has established for us.

Honor your father and mother.

C. S. Lewis' wife, Joy, tells this story. It is a poignant reminder as to the dignity that we are to give those who are our parents who are living into the latter stages of their life.

She writes, "It seems that a mother, father and their four-year-old son and an aging grandfather all lived together. The grandfather's hands were unsteady and at mealtimes he often missed his mouth. Eventually they removed him from their table to eat in a corner alone and in disgrace. After dropping his bowl one day, they took away his utensils leaving him with his hands to feed himself, feeding himself from a trough. The parents shouldn't have been surprised, but they were, when the father found their young son doing a little woodworking in the shed. "What are you doing?" the father asked. "I'm making a trough," he smiled for approval, "to feed you and mama from when I get big." Well soon, the old man was back at his place at the table, eating with a fork and from a plate and no one ever scolded him again."

Honor your father and mother.

Whether you're a child and you do that best through obedience, whether in late adolescence and young adulthood you do that best through a non-rebellious questioning and breaking from them to become the adult God has created you to be, whether you are doing that now as an adult relating to your parents as equals, or whether you're moving, as I am, into a phase of life that looks like,

through the empowerment of God's Spirit, serving them with care and with compassion. And all along, my sons and my daughter watch the ways that I go about honoring or dishonoring my parents, and I hope that through what they see in my honoring of them they may one day ask questions in a non-rebellious fashion, move into adulthood and live lives for the glory of God, relate to me one day as equals and then care for me when I'm no longer able to hold a fork in my hand

Honor your father and mother.

Chapter Eight

The Easiest Commandment to Keep? Exodus 20:13

God is in the business of giving life. Do you want to be part of God's life-giving work in the world? Do you want to participate in the redeeming, restoring work of God, in the lives of others? What kind of person are you; are you a life-giver or a life-taker? Your words and actions—do they give life or kill it? Even your thoughts and certainly your conversations—do they enliven and revitalize or do they deplete and cause life to wither?

When I think of the Bible's descriptions of life, at its fullest, as it is meant to be and will be, I am skeptical but attracted. My skepticism comes because God's picture of the future sometime seems impossible, especially when I know how deeply flawed we all are and how far short life in the present falls. But I am attracted when I think of what God says is possible fully in the future, but even in part now: *"Now (thinking of the life to come) the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."* (Revelation 21:3-4)

800 years earlier the same amazing future is described in Isaiah:

*"The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.*

"The cow will feed with the bear,

*their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
"The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,
and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.
"They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea."(11:6-9)
"Never again will there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days...
(My people) will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit...
They will not toil in vain
or bear children doomed to misfortune;
for they will be a people blessed by the LORD,
they and their descendants with them."(Isaiah 66:20-23)*

***God's children are called to spend their
days imitating their Father, by giving life.***

The picture God paints is what we imagine the Garden of Eden to have been like. Work and relationships are as they were meant to be. Nature and humanity live in harmony. God is with people and we with each other in ways that bring joy and meaning. I don't want to leave the picture too quickly because that vision of the future is what gives the present its meaning. We anticipate a future when animosity, coveting, anger, cruelty and hatred are gone. Absent also are hunger, loneliness, pain, heartache and loss.

Now consider this, as sons and daughters of God, we have been given the privilege of not only experiencing some of that in our own lives, here and now, but also of being the means whereby others may experience it now in part and later in whole. That's why I asked if you are a life-giver or a

life-taker? I see that “life-giving” when I watch and hear one of you respond to insult or attack by genuinely feeling and showing compassion to the attacker. Love in the face of hostility upsets the natural order of things. Kindness throws a monkey wrench into the gears of the normal. The whole system of attack and counter-attack grinds to a halt when someone refuses to retaliate. New possibilities emerge—a seed of life is planted where pieces of death seemed inevitable. I see life planted when hostility is responded to with a sincere smile. I see the enemy of our souls confused and frustrated when we respond to injustice with genuine forgiveness. God’s children are called to spend their days imitating their Father, by giving life.

As I said, God is in the business of life. He is even now in the very act of redeeming His world and restoring us to the life He intended. His goal for us is real life and for eternity. And that life is not just mere existence (the ability to breathe and move) but a life that is filled with the joy, security, significance and love found in a relationship with God and each other. Imagine the best day of your life thus far in relationship with God and others and then multiply that experience a thousand fold. He has called us not only to experience that life but also to be the means of others experiencing it as well. So again I ask, do you bring life to relationships or death?

That brings us to the 6th Commandment, found in Exodus 20:13, “*You shall not murder.*” Those words are so stark, so blunt, as to be almost crass. They would shock most of us if we thought they were directed at us personally. Imagine your father, or a spouse, looking at you as you walked from the house in the morning, saying seriously, “Don’t kill anyone today.” We’d probably be insulted after being shocked. But the command *is there* and it is for God’s people, for us.

The sheer simplicity of it is notable. It is easily remembered

and it is clear. God doesn't use convoluted language to make His point; and we can't miss the point—"You shall not murder!" We might think of this as the easiest of all commandments to keep. On our Commandment keeping list, we check it off so easily. Coveting, serving other gods in my life, and even bearing false witness, those I ponder to consider if I am guilty, but murder? Nope, haven't killed anyone! But oh, the 6th Commandment is so much more. I want to suggest that this commandment may be one of the most difficult to keep. The Bible calls us to think of this commandment at three levels:

- The physical act of murdering another.
- The "heart" act of harboring resentment toward another.
- The God-enabled act of loving our enemy.

As to the physical act of murder, the second sin recorded in the Bible is murder. The first was turning against God's will and the second quickly ran to the ultimate conclusion of refusing God—death. After Adam and Eve rebelled against God, their son killed his brother. God created life and humanity immediately set out to destroy it. Much of human history looks like humanity's attempts at killing itself. We live in a murderous world. People kill people. We read or hear of it nearly every day. It becomes so routine that unless it affects someone close to us we barely give it attention—we've grown to expect it. "That's life!" we say—what an ironic reaction! It's not life; it's death; it's murder.

Carol Kent recently wrote a book entitled *When I Lay My Isaac Down*. Many of us have read it. Carol's young, intelligent, middle-class, Christian, military academy trained son murdered his wife's ex-husband. We like to think, "I'd never murder anyone." Carol's son thought the same. But taking someone else's life by our own hand is not the only way we physically murder. Defective construction and

machines, defective drugs and automobiles, pollution, exploitation of the poor, alcohol and drugs murder the body.

There is also murder by willful negligence or omission: It is murderous when decisions by company leaders knowingly and willfully put workers or consumers at risk. For example, just because the result is long after the decision doesn't make cigarette producers and distributors any less guilty. Even killing in the name of national security is murder when it is actually because of national pride or worse yet, greed. I do not believe war is always wrong but oh how we must search our hearts to know our motives. And so God commands, "You shall not murder."

I want to suggest that this commandment may be one of the most difficult to keep.

Most of us know that the well-known King James translation of this verse and the most popular expression of it is, "You shall not kill." There are at least three different Hebrew words translated "kill." Two such words are used hundreds of times in the Old Testament but one of them, the one used here in Exodus 20 is used only a few times and means "murder." "*Rasah*" is the specific Hebrew word for a range of what we may call "personal" killings, from manslaughter to premeditated murder."¹ When referring to the 6th commandment, the New Testament uses a Greek word that likewise means murder.

Why is God so opposed to murder? The answer to that may seem so obvious to you that it is hardly worth mentioning. Our rationale is something like Tevya's in "Fiddler on the Roof" when he reasoned that if we continue taking an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, fairly soon the whole world will be blind and toothless. But God's rationale is infinitely more significant than that.

First of all, God is the sovereign Lord of life who alone has the authority to give it and take it away. God created *all* life including plants and animals. J. Douma wrote, "Plant and animal life exists first of all for the glory of God, and only then for human benefit."² We can kill plants and animals not just because we can or because we are higher up the "food chain" but because God granted the permission in Genesis 1:29-30 (plants) and Genesis 9:3 (animals). We can take plants and animals for food not because it is just "natural" but because their Creator has allowed it.³

You can see where that takes us; if we are to respect plants and animals as created by God then we must much more respect human beings created by God. Only with God's permission can we take life lawfully. Genesis 9:5 says, *"From each man...I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man."* To take the life of another unlawfully is to rob God of what is His.

Secondly God is opposed to murder because human beings are made in the image of God.⁴ Contrary to the way we talk about unborn infants or even very sick old people, humanness is not defined by viability, it is defined by the *imago Dei*—the image of God. God said it so clearly in Genesis 9:5-6: *"From each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man."*

Human beings bear the image of God. To murder a human being is an offense against the person of God! Imagine someone assaulting or even insulting your son or daughter and you get some idea of the offense—only infinitely more so in God's case. The 6th Commandment is not built on a humanistic basis but a biblical one—we are created in God's image and we exist for God's glory.⁵ And so the prohibition is clear and concise—"You shall not murder!"

But you know that taking the physical life is not all God means. Some time ago I was accused of something very serious of which I was not guilty. The accusation was leveled against me by someone with much more power than I have and thus I was powerless to correct the injustice. In my hurt and then anger I found myself thinking about how I could secretly retaliate and inflict some damage to the person's reputation. I didn't only want justice; I wanted revenge. In that, I realize quickly my own propensity to murder. One man wrote, "Revenge is not just driven by the desire to restore justice but reflects the disordered state of...the human heart."⁶

Jesus said in Matthew 5:21-22, "*You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'* But I tell you that anyone who is **angry** with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin... Anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." (Emphasis Added) Jesus does not argue with the 6th Commandment; He argues that our interpretation of it doesn't go far enough. We knew we weren't supposed to murder but Jesus says it goes much deeper than that—we aren't even supposed to carry anger toward another.

Lest we misunderstand how serious Jesus is about this, He uses the same phrase to note the same consequence of both murder and anger—they are both "subject to judgment." We don't believe that do we? In our thinking, we have created a hierarchy of expected consequences; some sins are clearly more wrong (for example, murder) but others are not so bad (for example, anger). But Jesus says our anger may be as murder. But before talking about the comparison, first let His judgment on anger sink in! He said, "*I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.*"

Anger is subject to God's judgment? Now fear can serve an important function in our lives. It is a feeling that wells up within us when something or someone threatens us. But anger usually rises when there is a threat to my will; something or someone is getting in the way of what I want. It is what we DO with that anger that may become the problem. If we indulge it, it grows. It's like fertilizing a tomato plant. We may not act on it immediately but we nurture it to grow within.

The word "angry" that Jesus uses is an orgy of feeling, a temporary madness. It is interesting that we speak of anger as being "mad" at someone. And the word carries the idea of a continuing attitude: "is being angry" "bears anger" "carries anger" or is "nursing a grudge", *a continuing anger, a prolonged, carried around anger*. Fredrick Dale Bruner wrote, "It is this attitude of 'carried anger' that Jesus confronts with judgment. This attitude must go. And this attitude is not just an attitude or an inner matter, an emotion that is not yet a deed; this 'carrying around' of anger presupposes a **decision** to carry it, and such a decision constitutes a deed, a decision for a way to live."⁷

Anger can be almost totally hidden as in a slow-burning resentment. Or it can be very visible in an all-out search for ways to get back, to inflict harm, at least emotional harm. Just watch older children to see it in its rawest forms. The only difference between them and us is that some of us have learned a sophisticated anger. Many of us restrain ourselves from physically harming another and with self-control maybe even restrain ourselves from saying anything to harm another. But what is within our hearts?

We take pride in our non-retaliation and regard our hostile feelings as legitimate. I wouldn't send them a letter-bomb (I'm not a murderer!) but I'll never speak to them again. Oh so quickly, Jesus' interpretation of the 6th

commandment cuts to the core, revealing our sinfulness. Dallas Willard wrote: "All our mental and emotional resources are marshaled to nurture and tend the anger...Energy is dedicated to keeping it alive; we constantly remind ourselves of how wrongly we have been treated. And when it is allowed to govern our actions...its evil is quickly multiplied in heart-rending consequences and in the replication of anger and rage in the hearts and bodies of everyone it touches."⁸

Anger usually rises when there is a threat to my will; something or someone is getting in the way of what I want.

And Jesus goes on to drive home His point in the rest of verse 22: "*Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.*" (Matthew 5:22b) Like most kids I was so woodenly literal in my understanding of Scripture that as a child I thought if I called my brother a "fool" I would go to hell. I thought there was something inherent in the word "fool" itself that meant you "didn't pass go and didn't collect \$200" but went straight to eternal jail. We aren't even certain what the word "Raca" means except that in context it is derisive. Together with the word "fool" it indicates an insulting contempt for another person. The problem is not so much in the word as the heart. The words of contempt only express the boiling over of our hearts.

Jesus' interpretation of the law goes beyond protecting physical life; it goes to protecting the person. God is seriously opposed to words and even thoughts that demean a human being—demean the image of God. John Calvin wrote, "Put on all the airs you want to. Even though your hate may be hidden and you don't show the slightest sign

of ill will and you hide your own eyes against it, don't think that God consequently has his eyes closed too." ⁹ Does this mean that if I harbor anger toward someone, I am going to hell? Without intervention we would! That is how serious this sin is. It is wholly inconsistent with a kingdom lifestyle. Nothing but the death of Jesus is sufficient to mitigate the divine penalty against that sin. Don't make the sins Christ died for so abstract as to say the "sins of the world" without also making it very personal—my sins, my sin of anger toward (and fill in the name).

And so by God's grace working in us we choose to forgive instead of resenting. And we keep making the choice and act out that choice in refusing to think what we used to think and refusing to say what we used to say.

If what Jesus said is true, then His words drive us to despair of ourselves both for our liability to judgment and our helplessness to be different. And it is this understanding of my sin that drives me to grace. I stand forgiven not because I deserve it but because Jesus died in my place. I am called to a new way of treating others, by the same grace shown to me. And Jesus' Spirit promises to empower me to want to and to, in fact, forgive. Philippians 2:12-13 says, *"Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, **for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.**"* (Emphasis Added) And so by God's grace working in us we choose to forgive instead of resenting. Crying out for God's help, we make the choice. And we keep making the choice and act out that choice in refusing to **think** what we used

to think and refusing to **say** what we used to say.

But the Commandment does not end there. The Westminster Larger Catechism rightly says, "Where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded."¹⁰ The 6th Commandment not only calls us to not take life but to give life. We are not only to spare our enemies the worst but we are to give them the best.¹¹ The Bible says it this way:

"Do not hate your brother in your heart...Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge...but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." (Leviticus 19:17-18) And, *"Do not repay anyone evil for evil...Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him...'"* (Romans 12:17-20) Active love! It is not enough to say "no" to physical murder and to say "no" to verbal or attitudinal murder. We must say, "yes" to also loving our enemies.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:43-47, *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"*

Martin Luther wrote, "The (6th) commandment is violated not only when we do evil but also when we have the opportunity to do good to our neighbors...but fail to do so. If you send a naked person away when you could clothe him, you have let him freeze to death. If you see anyone who is suffering from hunger and do not feed her, you have let her starve to death etc...It will be of no help for you to use the excuse that you did not assist their deaths

by word or deed, for you withheld your love from them and robbed them of the kindness by means of which their lives might have been saved. Therefore God rightly calls all persons murderers who do not offer counsel or assistance to those in need and peril of body and life."¹²

This is too much! Can this be done? Is God serious?

- Not actually kill him? That I can refrain from.
- Refuse to harbor resentment against him? That's hard but by God's grace maybe I can.
- But actively love him? You must be kidding!

John Calvin wrote: "Say that your enemy does not deserve even your least effort for **his sake**. But for the sake of the image of God, which recommends him to you, he is worthy of your giving yourself and all your possessions. Assuredly there is but one way in which to achieve what is not merely difficult but utterly against human nature: to love those who hate us, to repay their evil deeds with benefits, to return blessings for reproaches. It is that we remember not to consider men's evil intentions, but to look upon the image of God in them..."¹³

It starts with a decision: Am I willing to be a life giver or will I remain, in my heart, a life-taker? God has called us to be life givers in our hearts, in our speech and in our choices to actively love. And He has given us His Spirit to empower us to change, to choose life, to live life in our hearts and our actions. Will you and I let go of our so-called rights and resentments and choose to be life givers? Remember the promise of God in Philippians 2:12-13: "*Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*"

"You shall not murder."

End Notes

¹ Zondervan Expository Dictionary

² J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 208

³ Ibid, p. 207

⁴ Michael Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom*, p. 151

⁵ J. Douma, Ibid, p. 214

⁶ Wannewetsch in Bratten and Seitz, *I am the Lord Your God*, p. 154

⁷ Fredrick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook*, p. 175

⁸ Dallas Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, p. 150

⁹ Paraphrased from Calvin, *Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, p. 159

¹⁰ Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 99

¹¹ paraphrasing J. VanBrugen in Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 232

¹² Martin Luther in William Brown, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 263

¹³ Calvin in Horton, Ibid, p. 175

Chapter Nine

You Shall Not Commit Adultery

Exodus 20:14

Presented by Trevor Lee

When I was in junior high or high school one of the things we were exposed to was the “True Love Waits” campaign that encouraged us to sign a card pledging that we would not have sex until we were married. A lot of kids signed those cards. And I heard recently that in follow-up studies about sixty percent of the people who pledged to wait for marriage broke their pledge, not a tremendously different number than society at large. All of these teachings focused on not having sex before marriage because God said not to, and I think the message is much the same with adultery: don’t do it because God said not to. I agree that God says not to, otherwise I wouldn’t be talking about the seventh commandment today, but our prohibitions are so detached and unrelational. You could almost get the idea that God just pulled some rules out of a hat and told us to obey. But that is so far from the truth. The reason God has given us instruction on the limits and guidelines of sex is that it is important to Him and He knows it has a big impact on us. God gives us commands because He loves us and wants what’s best for us.

When I knew that God had called me to become a pastor I realized that all the pastors I knew used their kids for most of their illustrations, so I thought, I better have some kids. So Michelle and I had Isaiah. Obviously that’s not the reason we had him, but it works out well because he really does illustrate something well today. He started crawling about a month ago, and ever since he did he wants to get into everything he shouldn’t. So as soon as we set him down on the floor he tends to head straight for the nearest

electrical cord and tries to put it in his mouth. Of course Michelle and I step in and stop him, especially since he has teeth now and could probably gnaw through it. Part of what's hard is that all we can do is tell him no. He doesn't understand why and I think it would be so much better if we were able to say, "Isaiah, electricity is a good thing that helps us a lot, but it can also be very dangerous. If you chew through that cord it will really hurt you." And just like it would help Isaiah know the dangers of chewing on power cords if he knew the power of electricity, we can't fully understand the command not to commit adultery unless we understand the power and beauty of sex.

Unless we understand the mysterious beauty of marriage and sex we will never grasp the seriousness of adultery and other sexual sin. And if we're going to talk about relationships and sex there's no better place to start than with the first relationship, in Eden.

I think between reading the creation story in Genesis and having it read to me I've probably heard it about 100 times over the course of my life. And that may not even be an exaggeration since I've been in church for over twenty-five years now. I think four times a year is a pretty conservative estimate. One of the problems with this is that when you hear something that many times you have a tendency to not even think about it anymore. We all know that God created Adam who got lonely and when none of the bears or tigers really wanted to just hang out God made Eve so that the two of them could be friends and not be lonely. That all sounds pretty uninspiring. Compared to that I think it would be more exciting to watch TV. We've heard this story so many times that we are not even impacted by the depth of Adam's loneliness or God's creative power or His love in creating another person who would represent the image of God with Adam. I want you to listen to this story of the first man and woman to ever live on the earth and

try to hear it as though you had never heard it before. Don't run ahead to what you know is going to happen. Let yourself enter into the story and experience it. Try to feel what Adam and Eve felt. Try to imagine what it would have been to be them.

"The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.'

The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.' Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found."(Genesis 2:15-20)

Even after God says that it is not good for man to be alone, Adam has to go through what had to be a long and arduous process of naming all the animals. And isn't it interesting that apparently part of the reason for Adam to go through this whole process was for him to realize his complete incompatibility with all of the animals. I'm sure he was taken by their beauty and uniqueness, but none of them was suitable to be his companion and helper. I can imagine that as each animal was brought to Adam he had a glimmer of hope. "Maybe this next one will be a companion for me so I won't be alone. Maybe the emptiness and loneliness I feel will go away soon." But each time he was disappointed. He was lonely.

"So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man."

God didn't have to use Adam's rib to make Eve. He had already created everything else from nothing and He certainly was not bound to use a part of the man to make the woman. But God did use Adam's rib. And the fact that He did is the first indication of the unity and relationship and connection that God had planned for Adam and Eve. Their very bodies would be connected by the way they were made. Eve was joined to Adam through her very construction.

*"The man said,
'This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called "woman,"
for she was taken out of man.'* "

***What Adam said was a statement full
of relief, joy, passion, excitement,
and fulfillment.***

Do you wonder what Adam was thinking before God brought Eve to him. He had just gone through species after species of animal and disappointment after disappointment as each fell short of the ability to know him and partner with him. He may have been thinking, "Okay, here we go with another one. I just want to name this one and get it over with. I can't handle the hope anymore. I'm bound to be by myself forever." But what a surprise when Eve arrives. Think back to the first time you saw your wife or husband, or even the first time you saw a girlfriend or

boyfriend. It was exciting. There was an attraction. But you had seen other men or women before that. This was the first woman Adam had ever seen, and he knew immediately the depth of connection he had with her. He raises his voice in a romantic song, "This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." Adam knew that he was deeply connected to this woman in ways that he could not fully explain. We read what Adam said as a theological statement, but I think it was a statement full of relief, joy, passion, excitement, and fulfillment.

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."

This verse starts by saying "for this reason." It is because of the deep and mysterious connection between man and woman that a man leaves his father and mother to be united to his wife. Most children spend at least eighteen years in their home. During this time, at least in the best of situations, the children and their parents develop deep and lasting bonds with each other. They have years of shared history, memories, traditions, and building of trust and love. But the bond of marriage is so strong that it binds people together in a way that they were never bound to their families. Because of the deep and intimate bonds of marriage the Bible says that people will leave the deep relationships of their family to be united to their spouse.

"And the two will become one flesh." Is it possible to be any more intimate or close than that? Just as man and woman were taken from the same flesh, when they come together in marriage and sex they are reunited as one flesh. Obviously the two people do not become physically reconnected at the rib and walk around as one person, but in a mysterious way the man and woman are re-united as one.

"The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame."

So here's something we don't talk about very often. After God brought Eve to Adam and he expressed his sheer joy for this creation of God, the Bible says that Adam and Eve stood together, completely naked, and they felt no shame. I've always heard that the point of this part of the story is that because no one had sinned they didn't need clothes. I'll grant that it is true that the lack of sin in creation at that point made it easier for Adam and Eve to be naked together, but I think that in the context this kind of misses the point. In the story Adam has just celebrated the unity he has with Eve as bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh and the author has just stated that a man and woman will leave their families to come together as one flesh. This is the next verse. Adam and Eve are basking in a perfect relationship. There is no fear, guilt, doubt, shame, or insecurity. They stand before each other in the most vulnerable of positions possible and they love it. It is perfect unity.

I hope that you are starting to get a sense of the deep and almost inexplicable bond that God created to exist between a man and a woman; a bond that would bring them together as one flesh and allow them to stand naked physically and emotionally before each other without shame. The Bible goes on to further describe this beautiful and mysterious union. Ephesians 5:31-32 quotes Genesis 2 and then applies this teaching to the relationship between Christ and his Church. In a mysterious way marriage and sex represent the union of Christ and the Church. I don't know how much more holy marriage and sex can be than to represent the relationship of Christ and the Church. This is a beautiful, holy, creative, and unbelievable mystery.

But Satan loves to take what God has created to be beautiful and good and make it ugly and dirty and evil. In the book *Sacred Sex*, it says, "There seems to be a universal principle at work in the world that the things that

have the greatest potential for good if misused, also possess the greatest potential for evil." And humanity has proved this to be true in the area of sexuality. We have made perversion an art form.

Whether we like it or not there are many things we have learned from our culture when it comes to sex. First, culture tells us that sex is purely physical. You can have sex outside the bonds of marriage with whomever you want because it's just a physical activity. The message is communicated that it's really no different that climbing a mountain or playing golf. "It's just sex," is a phrase not uncommon in our society.

In a mysterious way marriage and sex represent the union of Christ and the Church. This is a beautiful, holy, creative, and unbelievable mystery.

Our culture also grossly objectifies people as "things" to be used for personal pleasure. This is especially true in the portrayal of women on TV, in movies and magazines, and even in video games. One evidence of this is the pornography industry that takes in an estimated \$2 billion a year. On the internet or the TV these are not people with feelings and insecurities and personality. These are only images meant to give you what you want without any investment. You don't have a relationship with an image, but it doesn't matter since we are only after personal pleasure anyway.

Another cultural message is that sexual fidelity is not prized, in fact it is boring. Most TV shows about married couples make fun of the fact that they never have sex and even if they do it is more of a chore than anything else. Before they got married it was great, but the worries and issues of kids, bills, and monotony have killed what they

had. In fact, if you want to be fulfilled sexually, then it is best to avoid marriage altogether.

Jacqueline Kennedy Onasis was once quoted as saying, "I don't think there are any men who are faithful to their wives." And even beside her personal experience it would seem that she was not crazy to say that. Studies have quite a range of statistics for how many married people will have an adulterous affair at some point in their lives, but an average of the studies would suggest a number somewhere around fifty percent. And as you may have guessed that number is not any different within the church than it is in the rest of the world. And the messages we get from culture tell us that this is no big deal. I recently heard a radio DJ say that if people were really secure in their marriages then they would let their spouse go and sleep with other people with their approval. It is only those who are insecure who would not allow this. Is that the issue? If sex were only physical and only for pleasure then perhaps it wouldn't be a big deal to sleep around.

When marital oneness and unity is broken through adultery it destroys trust, breaks up families, smears reputations, and injures people in ways that can never truly be repaired. This is why God prohibits adultery.

Our society also says that the most important thing is that you are happy and you get whatever you can to make you happy. It doesn't matter that what you do affects anyone else, as long as you are happy. And this includes your fidelity or lack thereof in marriage. Dame Rose Macaulay said, "Adultery is a meanness and a stealing, a taking away from someone what should be theirs, a great selfishness,

and surrounded and guarded by lies lest it should be found out ... And out of meanness and selfishness and lying flow love and joy and peace beyond anything that can be imagined." Hurting others for my own pleasure brings love and joy and peace? This is the logical outcome of a me-first attitude toward life.

Compare this to what God created sex to be. It is supposed to be the ultimate expression of love and unity between two people who are committed to each other for the rest of their lives. It joins them together in a mysterious way that is beyond what we can explain as humans. It is the best metaphor God has given us to describe our worship of Him when we worship Him in Spirit and truth. Sex is supposed to be where two people whose lives are intricately woven together in love, relationship, emotion, commitment, and passion can stand together being naked and unashamed.

People cannot stand before each other naked, both physically and emotionally, outside the bonds of marriage, when it is difficult even within marriage. One of the main things I want you to hear today is that God created sex to be a beautiful culmination of the oneness of marriage that brings unity and closeness and reminds people of the glory and relationship of Christ and His relationship with His bride, the Church. It is beautiful and good.

So when marital oneness and unity is broken through adultery it destroys trust, breaks up families, smears reputations, and injures people in ways that can never truly be repaired. This is why God prohibits adultery. It takes what is beautiful beyond comprehension and makes it destructive beyond our worst nightmares. Fear, lies, scheming, secrecy, guilt, and rationalizing surround affairs. A far cry from being naked and unashamed. And why do we call them "affairs?" Doesn't even the word conjure up excitement and adventure? I do not deny that there is probably great excitement, pleasure, passion, and even

enjoyment in an affair; otherwise they would not go on for any period of time. But they can never hold the beauty and oneness that God meant for sex to be. They are a cheap imitation that mocks the creative beautiful mystery of God.

I imagine that this feels heavy and sickening; it does to me. If you are involved in an affair or have been you probably feel very condemned or defensive at the moment. We'll come back to that feeling, but before we do I want to touch on two other things. First, if you hear all of this and think, "I am so glad I have never committed adultery," I am with you, I'm glad you haven't too. But before we get too happy with ourselves let's remember what Jesus said in the New Testament:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matthew 5:27-28) You see if we think that we have not violated the commandment of adultery, then we have fallen into the lie of our culture that sex is only physical. In reality, anything that detracts from the unity and oneness of marriage and sexual union within marriage is a violation of the command not to commit adultery. Looking at someone not your spouse and wondering what it would be like to have a relationship with them, giving your spouse the silent treatment, pornography, dressing seductively to draw the looks of others, giving so much love and attention to your kids that you have none left for your spouse, physically or emotionally abusing your spouse, failure to communicate, having sex outside marriage, flirting with people other than your spouse (flirting with your spouse is a good thing), using sex as a weapon, and on and on. We are all adulterers. Sure, the consequences of giving your spouse the silent treatment may be far less severe than sleeping with someone outside of marriage, but both greatly detract from the possibility of being able to be

naked and unashamed.

Secondly, I know this sermon may seem to only speak to those who are married, but it doesn't. If you are not married right now the principle of marital oneness and unity applies to you, too. The Dutch have a slang word for sex, "*naaien*," and it refers to two pieces of cloth being sewn together in such a way that they cannot be pulled apart. And this is what sex does. God created it to be in the context of a loving, committed relationship because it binds people together physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Sex cannot be just physical, no matter how much you may want it to be. When you come together with someone who you are not married to in a sexual union, not only are you unable to experience the full beauty and wonder of being naked and unashamed, but it is like the two pieces of cloth being sewn together. When you leave that person you tear and there are pieces of you left all over the place. You do not have all of you to give again. I admit that for a long time I had no idea why I shouldn't have sex before I was married other than God said not to. And while I took that as reason enough, I hope that you can understand in some way today the sanctity of sex within the context of marriage and why God asks you to wait for your own good and for His. That's not just a trite thing people say to try to guilt you into waiting; it really is for your own good. God does not want you to be ripped apart and to experience sex as so much less than what He created it to be.

Let me say what is difficult to say again; we are all adulterers. I am an adulterer. You are an adulterer. None of us escape falling short of the beauty God created marriage and sex to be. And this brings me back to the sick feeling that may be pervading this sermon for those who have committed adultery. I hope that now we all feel the pain of the ways we've detracted from God's design for marriage and sex and thus become adulterers. I hope it

hurts us because it should. But as with all other sins, the story does not end here. If we repent of our sin and seek to live a life that moves us away from our adulterous ways, God will forgive us and give us His grace. That is part of the beauty of the law and the standards God sets for us. They show us how to live but they also make it abundantly clear that we are not capable of keeping them perfectly. So we are all in need of God's grace and He gives it freely to all who repent and rely on Christ for the forgiveness of their sins. There is no sin that is beyond the love and grace of God for those who would accept it.

And while we affirm this to be true, why is it that adultery seems to be one of the unforgivable sins of the church. Oh we may say that we can forgive people who commit adultery, but a lot of the time we don't act like we have. People who commit adultery have just injured too many people and caused too much pain. They have done the unthinkable and to forgive them seems like it would somehow condone what they did. Their sin defines them and we believe that they deserve it. But "When adultery causes separation between a person and a Christian community, both moral crusaders and immoral adulterers give credibility to a damnable biblical heresy. They allow adultery to become the defining event in a person's life."¹ This event becomes what defines them more than their commitment to Christ, their sincere repentance, or the grace they have received. Hear me well on this. If we as a church, the people of God, refuse to offer grace and forgiveness to an adulterer, then we spit on the cross of Christ and say that His death and resurrection were in vain. Not to mention the fact that we are hypocrites because we all fall short on the command against adulterers.

The fact that an adulterer, just like any other sinner, must repent of their sin in true remorse and fall on the mercy of God is a given. There is no forgiveness where there is no

repentance. And one other thing. It is not up to you or me to decide if someone's repentance is sincere or not. Repentance is judged by God and proved by future actions, not by the judgment of a person who is unable to know the heart.

Can we please not pretend that some of us are immune to having an affair? I don't think there are many people in the world who say, "I would really love to commit adultery." Affairs have allure. When Michelle and I got married we had heard this somewhere and I'm thankful that we did. From the beginning we decided to never say that there was no way we would have an affair. We don't have that much faith in our flesh. But this also has led us to set up boundaries, pray for God's protection of our marriage, and be honest with each other about our weaknesses.

If we repent of our sin and seek to live a life that moves us away from our adulterous ways, God will forgive us and give us His grace.

So what do we do if faced with the temptation to fall into sexual sin, and the sin of adultery in particular? First, I think we can take a page out of Joseph's book and just run away. When Potiphar's wife approached him and wanted to sleep with him he slipped out of his cloak and ran away. When confronted with the possibility of marital infidelity and compromising of God's plan for sex and marriage we need to run away. We cannot even think; just run.

Second, pray! Ask God to give you desire for only your spouse. Ask Him to keep you strong in the face of temptation. Ask Him to help you hate the thought of infidelity. If you are not married ask Him to help you keep a positive view of sex that will inspire you to wait for the setting He ordained. The Spirit of God is powerful and can

sustain us when our will cannot. We have to rely on His help to walk in this arena as He wants us to.

And don't be afraid to find someone else and be open with them and ask them to hold you accountable to the standards God has established. Not just to keep you from doing something you shouldn't, but also to help you pursue with passion the oneness and unity that God wants you to have with your spouse or future spouse. We are often too embarrassed to do this, but the truth is that others have the same struggles we do or ones similar to them, and if we open up we are likely to find out we are not alone.

So just like Isaiah can't chew on the power cord because it could really hurt him, sex is a very beautiful, powerful wonderful thing, but if we use it outside the context God gave us for it then it can really hurt us and others. That is why God says, "*Do not commit adultery.*"

End Notes

¹ Tim A. Gardner, *Sacred Sex*

Chapter Ten

Pilfering, Lifting, Swiping, Filching and otherwise Stealing

Exodus 20:15

Mark Twain supposedly said, "It is not good sportsmanship to pick up a 'lost' golf ball while it is still rolling." God said that differently and much more seriously, "*You shall not steal.*"

A number of years ago I had a car I needed to sell. It had many dents and one whole section of a rear fender area that had rusted through. I took it to the garage of a friend and I worked for many nights using fiberglass patches and putty filling the dents that I couldn't pull out. There were a great many repairs but when I finished and repainted the car it looked great. But I knew the extent of the patching and puttying and I suspected that even a stout tire kick would cause some of the putty to fall off. But I advertised the car and priced it as if it were in the excellent condition it appeared.

A prospective buyer saw the car, loved it and was ready to pay me nearly what I was asking. If you had been me, what would you have done? Caveat emptor—Let the buyer beware? Or was I about to commit fraud, to steal from the unaware? Exodus 20:15 says, "*You shall not steal.*" Just so you don't think even less of me than you have a right to, I want you to know that the Holy Spirit pricked my conscience and I told the truth about the car. The man didn't purchase it. I lowered the price and told the next inquirer about the condition of the car and he bought it (I mean he purchased it).

A few years ago pollster George Barna reported that 91% of evangelical Christians said they keep the 8th

Commandment—they never steal.¹ Really? We don't like to call what we do "stealing"; we are not thieves! There is naturally a stigma attached to those words.

We like to call our sins by other names—a lie becomes a fib, adultery is simply an affair, false witness is an exaggeration, and stealing is snatching, palming, lifting, filching, copping, pinching, and the best, "borrowing." But God calls it what it is. And God calls it by its worst name so we will understand the seriousness and sinfulness of it.

500 years ago John Calvin understood this when he wrote, "As (we are) always on the alert to (take less seriously) the heinousness of sin...and to cover it by (deceptive names), the Lord sets forth, by way of example, whatever is foulest and most (sinful) in each (Commandment), that the (hearing) of it might produce a shudder in the hearer, and impress his mind with a deeper abhorrence of sin...For example, anger and hatred do not seem so very bad when they are designated by (those) names ("anger" and "hatred"); but when they are prohibited under the name of "murder," we understand better how abominable they are in the sight of God, who puts (anger and hatred) in the same class with that horrid crime (of murder). Influenced by his judgment, we (become better able) to judge more accurately the heinousness of our offences, which previously seemed trivial."² We may wish to call our actions by other names that make them seem harmless but God calls this what it is—stealing.

His words, "You shall not steal," are so simple, so straightforward and so totally encompassing. He doesn't say don't steal in this particular way or that particular way. He simply says, "don't steal" leaving nothing outside of the prohibition. My desire is that the Holy Spirit would sensitize our consciences afresh; that we would have a renewed understanding of the holy character of our God and our holy calling to reflect Him in our actions.

This message is to Christians just as it was originally a message to God's people. They didn't become God's people and we don't become Christians by obeying the 10 Commandments; they became and we become God's people by God's grace. But God's grace didn't stop at spiritual birth; He also wants us to live out the new relationship we have with Him and each other. Living as the people of God then and now is what the 10 Commandments are about. And so they are presented to us not simply to shame us and produce guilt but that they will lead us to repentance—a turning away from those things that defame the name of our Father-God and turning to imitating the character of our Lord. I want us to see our sin for what it is and run to the Savior for forgiveness and empowerment to live differently.

***God calls it by its worst name so
we will understand the seriousness
and sinfulness of it.***

So what does God encompass/include in this prohibition of stealing?

It had been a late game on Monday night football, and because the Broncos lost Jeff knew he'd lost his \$10.00 in the office football pool.

And so the next morning he was also tired and remembering that he'd worked especially hard during his 8 hours at the office last Friday, he decided to go in a little late this morning; no one would notice and if they did, he'd blame it on traffic.

On his way to the office, he stopped at the store to purchase tickets for an upcoming movie. His son had turned 13 two days earlier but he still purchased a child's ticket—after all, if he'd purchased the tickets just two days earlier...While he was checking out he also purchased a

lottery ticket and walking to the car he scratched it and found that he'd won \$20. And he thought, "You lose some, you win some, but it all works out in the end doesn't it?"

When he got back in the car he realized that he'd forgotten to return a movie video that he rented from the store. But he decided not to go back in to the store because he was already late for work and because he'd probably never try to rent from there again anyway. He got to work late but he plowed right in to the day's tasks. One of his jobs was to do the pricing of promotional items in his store. He had discovered that by combining items in quantities of three people would assume the price was lower per piece than purchasing them individually. The company picked up a little more profit when people assumed that three for \$8 was a better deal than \$2.50 each.

***The world may not call it stealing
but God does.***

Later, as he ended lunch with two clients he noticed that the server had failed to bill him for their beverages. He thought of all the times he'd been overcharged by restaurants and decided this made it closer to even. He paid the bill as it was. Remembering, however, that he would turn the bill in for reimbursement, he handwrote the amount for the tip on his receipt and made it for a dollar more than he had actually left on the table.

After lunch he got on line at his computer and spent nearly 30 minutes trying to find tickets for the next Broncos' game. Serendipitously, the guy from the mailroom came past. Everyone in the office strongly suspected the mail guy got extra tickets in some shady manner but that was his problem Jeff thought and Jeff bought the two tickets he wanted and at a good price, too. Just before he left work, he remembered the bills from home in his briefcase that he

meant to put in the mail. He asked the company receptionist/secretary for some stamps and he dropped the envelopes in the mail slot on his way out the door.

When he got to church the next Sunday, he saw the sermon title. Remembering that on the way to church, some guy had cut him off in traffic, Jeff was thankful the sermon wasn't about taking the Lord's name in vain. "Fortunately for me," he thought, "today's sermon is only 'You shall not steal.'" So sitting down in his chair he took out his checkbook and on his \$62,000 annual income he wrote out his monthly \$200 check for the work of the church.

The world may not call it stealing but God does. Again it was John Calvin who wrote, "When people have deceived others (or themselves), they think that at the same time they have blinded God...But God will not retreat from our fantasy."³ "*You shall not steal.*" God includes all theft in His prohibition whether it is the child who steals a penny candy or UN officials who take millions in the Oil for Food program.

Stealing comes in many forms:

- **Overcharging for a product or even overcharging for our time.** "Whatever the traffic will bear" is a principle of capitalism-gone-bad; it is not a principle from God. Even pagans know that charging \$5 for liter-bottles of water is unscrupulous in the aftermath of a hurricane.
- **Taking advantage of an unsuspecting or powerless person.** Proverbs 20:14 says, "It's no good, it's no good!" says the buyer (attempting to get the price down) then off he goes and boasts about his purchase." And we call it shrewd (wily, artful ways of dealing). What does God call it?

- **Stealing is selling a faulty product.**
- **Stealing is not declaring some income on our taxes or inflating our deductibles.** It has been said that if every individual and company were to pay their fair taxes the national debt would be paid off in only a very few years.
- **Stealing is sneaking entrance to an event.**
- **It is failure to give God His due in time, money or talent.**
- **Stealing is the merchant who uses false weights or volumes**—a gas station pump that is just 1/10 of one penny off. Deuteronomy 25:13-16 says, *"Do not have two differing weights in your bag—one heavy, one light. Do not have two differing measures in your house – one large, one small. You must have accurate and honest weights and measures, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. For the LORD your God **detests** anyone who does these things, anyone who deals dishonestly."* (Emphasis Added)
- **Stealing is the purchasing manager or sales rep who use kickbacks to make a sale or a public servant who uses his office to enrich himself.**

In December of 2005, the newspapers ran the following story:

WASHINGTON — Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham tearfully resigned from Congress on Monday after pleading guilty to charges that he took at least \$2.4 million in bribes from defense contractors and others.

Speaking to reporters, Cunningham, a former Vietnam War fighter pilot, broke down as he confessed about abusing the trust of his colleagues, friends and family. "The truth is

I broke the law, concealed my conduct and disgraced my office," he said in televised remarks, his voice shaking. "In my life I have had great joy and great sorrow. And now I know great shame."⁴

- **Stealing is the lender who charges exorbitant interest rates.**
- **It is the receiver of stolen goods.** From the on-line magazine Salon this past year I read the following: A recent study commissioned by the Gospel Music Association found that born-again teens file-trade just as much as their not-saved peers. "It doesn't make any difference if you prefer gospel music or death metal; you're still just as likely to file-swap. John W. Styll, president of the Gospel Music Association said, "I think that we perhaps naively hoped that the Christian teens would have been taking the moral high road. But among teens, they just don't see it as a moral issue. Ninety percent of them don't see illegal downloading as wrong. It may be illegal, but everyone is doing it."⁵
- **Stealing is the failure to correct an error in our favor.** Last Wednesday I went to the library soft drink machine to get a diet Pepsi. I put in my money and out came a bottle of water. I should have taken that as a kind reminder from God, but I took the water to the counter and asked for my money back so I could get a diet Pepsi. They gave me my money and told me to keep the water because there was no way they could return it. I took the money and the water and went back to the machine, planning to simply leave the water on the machine for someone else. Assuming the Pepsi button was wrongly labeled, I pushed the button for Diet Dr. Pepper. Out came a diet Dr. Pepper and a Diet Pepsi. I now stood there with three bottles having only paid for one.

What do I do? I went back to the counter and said I now have three bottles having only paid for one. I'm going to take my Diet Pepsi and leave the other two bottles with you to determine the ethical thing to do, and I walked away.

- **Stealing is failure to pay a just wage for someone's labor.** James 5:4-5 says, *"Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter."*
- **Shoplifting.** There are 100 million incidents per year worth over \$100 billion.
- **False advertising.**
- **Winning at gambling.** In order for you to win, another must lose and God is opposed to our gain at another's expense.
- **Market manipulation to increase stock price.**
- **Loafing on the job or doing personal work on company time.** Many years ago I worked for Commonwealth Edison, the Chicago area electric utility company. I wasn't the CEO; I read electric meters in the neighborhoods and businesses. The first day on the job, not knowing any better, I actually worked 8 hours. I'd get a long list of the homes I was to visit to read their meters and when I finished I'd go back to get more. After one day of this, the steward, who told me in no uncertain terms that I was messing up the system, confronted me sternly. The next day he wanted me to go with him and he would show me how it is done. We got our

lists in the morning and immediately went to a coffee shop some distance from the office. There we sat until about 10 a.m. He suggested that we meet back at the coffee shop about 2:00 P.M. after I had run my route. Done with my route in less than 4 hours, I hung around until 2 and met him and others again at the coffee shop until we went back to the office about 4:15. During our "breaks" he told me I could run my route as fast as I wanted to and after that I could go home or go do whatever I wanted to do, but I was never to return to the office until 4:15. He said that he and the others had worked for years to get the routes down in size to what they were and he didn't want some snot-nosed kid from the farm ruining the good thing they had going.

Stealing comes in many forms. We may call it by many other names, but to God they are all the same.

Why is stealing wrong? First of all, it's wrong because God says it's wrong! I didn't like my father saying I had to obey him just because he said to, but I quickly learned that he thought that was reason enough. My earthly father didn't always know best but I have learned that my heavenly Father does. And in much of life I simply have to trust Him.

But stealing is also wrong because it is the very opposite of the character of our God who is a giving God and not a taking God. Romans 8:32 says, "*He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*" If I'm going to imitate my Lord, I will be a generous giver and not a selfish stealer.

Stealing is also wrong because it violates the God-given dignity of another human being. This is a bit abstract for me, but consider this: Personal freedom, personal space, personal possessions are part of what it means to be human. God made us that way. God made us as flesh and

blood with names, addresses and belongings. We are expected to work, to acquire, to possess.

There is a distinct difference between one human being and another; each is unique. There is autonomy, independence, which is part of that uniqueness. A measure of control over one's own person includes a measure of control over one's possessions; it is part of that autonomy. In order to maintain that autonomy, others must not be allowed to encroach. We can't invade the space of another without violating their God-given right. And so theft violates the person and not just his property—ask anyone whose house has been broken into or who has been robbed.

God dignifies human beings by giving them work to do, from which they can expect to receive some of the fruit of their labor. Genesis 2:15-16 says, "*The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden;'*" "Theft is the failure to accept this creational intention of God. The thief disdains God's order of life, which is, in part, work and reward and both the victim and the thief are diminished. Stealing is wrong because it violates the God-given dignity of another human being.

Lastly, stealing is wrong because it violates God's ownership of all things. When we take from another, we take what God has given them. God has granted it to them; they are the stewards. To steal from them is to steal from God and to rebel against God's desires.

Why do we have such a propensity to steal? Aside from learning to obey his parents, one of the first things a child must learn is not to steal. As soon as an infant is old enough to want, they reach out to get. The fact that it belongs to another is only an obstacle to be overcome not a reason not to take it. And by early childhood, stealth will often be employed in getting what they want.

What drives the little thief and for that matter, what drives us? Two things come to mind: Need or greed. I want to suggest three actions and one attitude that God has given us by which we may respond to our need and resist greed. Four words: Work, Stewardship, Contentment and Generosity.

Work

What is the primary means God has established to meet our needs? Work. Genesis 2:15-16 says, *"The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden.'"* And, 2 Thessalonians 3:10 says, *"When we were with you, we gave you this rule: If a man will not work, he shall not eat."*

Childbearing was not a result of the sin of Adam and Eve, but difficult labor in childbearing was. Likewise, work is not a result of the "fall" – but work as unusually hard or difficult is. Work itself, as we see in Genesis 2:15, is a gift from God by which we live out our humanity, bring glory to God and meet our needs. And so the Bible says in Ephesians 4:28, *"He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands..."* Thomas Watson said, "An idle person tempts the devil to tempt him."⁶ Work!

Stewardship

The second word is "stewardship." God said to Adam in Genesis 2:15, *"work and take care of it."* God has given most of us the means by which we may care for our own physical needs. Part of that has to do with what we do with what we earn from our work. I haven't time in this message, but it has to do with frugality and saving. I love the Financial Peace University and Crown Ministries courses taught here in our own church, helping us in this issue of

stewardship of what God provides.

But it also has to do with the proper use of God's earth—environmental issues. Crop rotations, water conservation, pollution controls and much more are not only “cool” things to be for, they are in fact honoring to the God who gave us the earth to supply our needs. If it is need that drives some to steal, there are ways that they and we can help meet that need without stealing.

Contentment

The third word to meet our need and ward against greed is contentment. Philippians 4:12 says, *"I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."* Even in need, the Apostle Paul would remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:25-33: *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear... Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."* This contentment has to do with trust—Do I trust that God both knows and will meet my need according to His love for me?

Consider this, our present situation is God's will for us. Now lest you think that sounds like fatalism, think also of this:

- It doesn't mean this is His will forever but it is for now.
- It doesn't mean we shouldn't attempt to alter our circumstances, but we must do so with a confidence in God that if the circumstances don't alter, He is still

there and in control. And it means we will remain content in Him and not use unlawful means to circumvent His present will for us. Hebrews 13:5 says, *"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'*" "I know that is hard for us in our culture where having more is an idol. Greed is an inordinate desire for more. But as soon as a lust for more takes hold of us we have opened the door to thievery in our lives.

Generosity

And so the fourth word is the antidote for greed; it is generosity. Remember the Apostle Paul's words in Ephesians 4:28 *"He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, **that he may have something to share with those in need.**"* (Emphasis Added) Have you thought of that as a primary purpose for working and earning? As I have commented before many times, nothing breaks the stranglehold of greed better or faster than generosity. If greed has a grip on you, break its hold by giving. And don't wait for some great need of others to pull it from you. I.A.R. Wylie said: "True generosity requires more of us than kindly impulse. Above all it requires imagination--the capacity to see people in all their perplexities and needs, and to know how to expend ourselves (*not just our money*) effectively for them."⁷

Am I, are you, a taker (another euphemism for "thief") or a giver? It doesn't take thousands of rules or books of explanation to know how to respond to the 10 Commandments and this commandment in particular: Romans 13:9 says, *"The commandments, 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and whatever other commandment there may be, are*

summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' "

Work, Stewardship, Contentment, and Generosity are God's gracious means to meet our needs and keep us from greed so that we may not steal. Let me close with Paul's great words again in Ephesians 4:28: "*He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.*"

"You shall not steal."

End Notes

¹ Barna Report, 1992, p. 117

² Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.10

³ Calvin, *Sermons on Ten Commandments*, p. 189

⁴ Video at: http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-11-28-cunningham_x.htm?POE=NEWISVA

⁵ Salon.com on line magazine, May 25, 2004

⁶ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 168

⁷ In sermon by Pat Harrison, PBC, Cupertino, CA. Aug. 6, 1995

Chapter Eleven

Sticks and Stones Do Not Bear False Witness Exodus 20:16

In the late 1800s the French writer, Guy de Moupassant wrote the short story, entitled, *A Piece of String*.

It was market day in France and a large crowd of peasants and noblemen were making their way to the nearby town. One peasant, being a thrifty Norman, saw a piece of string on the ground and stooped to pick it up thinking it might be useful in the future. As he bent over to pick it up he saw his neighbor the harness maker looking at him. There was no love lost between these two men and embarrassed at being seen to pick up something as worthless as a piece of string, the peasant quickly slipped it into his clothing and then kept looking around as if still seeking something which he apparently didn't find and went on his way.

Later that morning everyone in the town square heard the announcement that a noble lady had, that very morning, on the same road to town, lost her black purse with money in it. A reward was offered for its return. Just moments later the local gendarmes found the peasant and ordered him to the mayor's office where he was told that the harness maker had seen him pick up the purse on the road. The peasant protested his innocence but to no avail because the harness maker said he not only saw him pick it up but also saw him look around to see if any money had fallen from the purse.

All that day and the next the word spread that the peasant had taken the purse and everywhere he went he tried to tell about the string but no one believed him. The next day the farmhand of another gentleman returned the purse

telling how he, the farmhand, had found it on the road but not being able to read to know to whom it belonged, he took it to his master that evening. When the peasant heard that the purse was returned he felt vindicated and said to all who would listen, "What grieved me was not the thing itself, do you understand, but it was being accused of lying. Nothing does you so much harm as being in disgrace for lying." But to his utter dismay, people thought the farmhand was an accomplice that the peasant had paid to return the purse. Everywhere the peasant went he was treated as a thief. In his own defense he retold the story over and over again.

"And so he lengthened his recital every day, each day adding new proofs, more energetic declarations and more sacred oaths...which he prepared in his hours of solitude, for his mind was entirely occupied with the story of the string. The more he denied it and the more artful his arguments, the less he was believed."

Moupassant ends his story with these words: "It preyed upon the peasant and he exhausted himself in useless efforts. He was visibly wasting away. (Hecklers) would make him tell the story of 'the piece of string' to amuse themselves... His mind kept growing weaker and about the end of December he took to his bed. He passed away early in January, and, in the ravings of death agony, he protested his innocence, repeating: 'A little bit of string—a little bit of string.'"

"Sticks and stones may break my bones but **words** can **never** harm me." Surely only a child could possibly believe that.

1700 years ago St. Augustine wrote, "The tongue inflicts greater wounds than the sword."

1100 years before that Solomon said in Proverbs 25:18, "*Like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow is the man who*

gives false testimony against his neighbor."

600 years before that God said, "*You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.*" (Exodus 20:16)

Puritan, Thomas Watson wrote in the 17th Century, "There is nothing more contrary to (the opposite of) God than a lie."¹ I believe that statement captures why the 9th Commandment is so important.

In the hierarchy of sins that I mentioned earlier wherein we consider murder to be the highest and worst of sins and stealing significantly below it in importance, we place lying even lower. In fact lying is so much a part of our culture and our lives that we find it somewhat odd that such a common and insignificant issue should make it into the 10 Commandments. But Watson captures the significance of the issue, and I repeat: "There is nothing more contrary to God than a lie."

We are all tempted to think of truth telling as simply a good idea and lying as usually a bad idea but we might treat the subject lightly if we don't see that the issue is rooted in the very person of God. This commandment didn't evolve from some ethics course in an ancient university; it came from God Himself. And God is truth. Truth is quite simply what conforms to reality.

- God actually exists.
- We exist with names, bodies and relationships.
- There is history and there is a future.
- Life is not an illusion but life is also not only what we see.

25 years ago John Lennon was killed. Many tributes were given to him and his songs. One, of which much has been made, is his famous song, *Imagine*:

“Imagine there's no heaven,
It's easy if you try,
No hell below us,
Above us only sky,
Imagine all the people
living for today...”

The attractive melody of that song attached to the attractive idea of peace makes it seem so right but it is so wrong. It perpetuates a lie and not the truth. It imagines that earth, sky, people and today are all there is. There is no heaven or hell, no God, and no life beyond now. What an empty, hopeless, and tragic existence.

But God is (He exists); the evidence for His existence is all around us and most supremely the evidence is in His Son, Jesus, who came to earth, died and rose again.

- And that God has said there is a past before which nothing existed except Him—He is the source of all reality and of all truth that conforms to that reality.
- And that God has said there is a future, which will be forever—a heaven and a hell.
- And that God has said that He created humanity to bear His image.

And we bear His image when we recognize truth, live in truth, and speak truth.

“There is nothing more contrary to God than a lie” and nothing more conformed to His character than the truth. Or as God said it, *“I am the LORD your God...You shall not give false testimony against you neighbor.”* It seems to me that the importance of this issue of truth telling can’t get much clearer or weightier than that.

There is yet another reason for not bearing false witness against another. No other creature has been invested with the level of dignity that humans possess. Humans alone,

God said, bear His image. When we thought about the 3rd Commandment (not misusing the name of the LORD), we remembered that we want to say or do nothing that will demean or defame the person of God. We will always be careful to protect His reputation because He is worthy.

This 9th Commandment is in one way a reflection of the 3rd. To demean or defame another human being is to demean and defame their Father in whose image they have been created. To bear false witness against another human being is to bear false witness against God. Think of it this way: Any human being you encounter is created by God and loved by God. Can we imagine God's attitude toward any of us who would seek to harm someone He has intentionally made and deeply loves? "There is nothing more contrary to God than a lie."

***God is (He exists); the evidence
for His existence is all around us
and most supremely the evidence is
in His Son, Jesus, who came to earth,
died and rose again.***

How seriously does God feel about this? Look at what He said about someone who bears false witness against his neighbor:

*"If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime, the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the LORD before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, then **do to him as he intended to do to his brother**. You must purge the evil from among you. The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you."* (Deuteronomy 19:16-20—

Emphasis Added) And in Exodus 20:16: *"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor."*

The very wording of the commandment suggests a legal setting. When we hear "false testimony" we think of a court of law. In those days the elders would hear testimony from witnesses about any cases brought before them. Truth is foundational to a just society. God knew any society would collapse if courts where truth could be determined did not protect life, marriage, family and property. We have laws that we expect citizens to obey to enable each other to live in peace, productivity and prosperity. When someone seems to break one or more of those laws it is imperative that we be able to discern the truth. And witnesses are central to this process of discovering the truth—that which conforms to reality.

We would probably do well to not judge another in this matter but trust God to help each of us in such situations should they arise.

As I showed you earlier, God takes the issue of witnessing very seriously. We do the same. That is why Lewis "Scooter" Libby was in trouble. In October, 2005 CNN reported, "Libby resigned Friday after a federal grand jury indicted him on five charges related to the leak probe: one count of obstruction of justice, two counts of perjury and two counts of making false statements."²

Most of us will never be in a courtroom under oath. Is the commandment only about legal perjury? As with other of the commandments, God illustrates the commandment by using the most flagrant example, thereby including all forms of lying up to and including perjury. So not only is perjury included in the commandment but all forms of lying, as other passages show us:

Leviticus 19:11 says, "*Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive one another.*" And, Proverbs 6:17 says, "*A lying tongue is one of seven things the Lord hates.*"

So now we state it most simply: You shall not lie! But we all know it is not quite that simple. What about Rahab of Jericho who lied to protect the very lives of the spies of Israel? What about Corrie ten Boom who lied to protect the lives of Jews she was hiding in her home during the holocaust? For centuries theologians have agreed that there are words that don't conform to reality (they are untrue) that may not yet be lies of the kind prohibited in Exodus 20:16. I want to suggest three kinds of lies that may not rise to the seriousness of the 9th Commandment. I know this is debatable but I only offer it quickly for your later consideration because I think the Commandment is describing something much more serious.

First there are **joking lies**, sometimes told where the intention is simply humor. Everyone knows the statement is not true and no deceit is intended. However humor can sometimes be misunderstood and any preacher worth his salt knows you have to be very careful with jokes. Jokes can also be used to convey real malice and we must know the difference.

Second are **necessary lies**, the kind told in dire circumstances. This is when I lie to protect my neighbor and not to hurt him. It is Corrie ten Boom or Rahab, that I mentioned earlier, or the midwives who kept Israelite babies alive in the Pharaoh's attempts at genocide. This category is difficult indeed and we would probably do well to not judge another in this matter but trust God to help each of us in such situations should they arise. Augustine and others following him have said even these lies are wrong; we must simply entrust our lives to God and tell the truth. But entrusting our own lives to God and betraying someone else are two different things. We must allow for

the wisdom and grace of God in such situations.

Third there are **polite lies**. These are the situations where your desire is to avoid humiliating someone or making them feel bad. Customary etiquette or even respect might call for this. Your friend asks what you think of his tie. The truth is you think it's ugly.

"Hey, do you like the way my hair is cut?"

"You didn't actually pay for that haircut did you?"

You ask your colleague at work, "How do you think I'm doing?" "Gene, your lack of basic intelligence and creativity have you on the verge of being let go."³

"Don't give false testimony against your neighbor" moves the Commandment out of the abstraction of lying into the concrete prohibition of the specific kinds of words that harm another.

This kind of lying is also a difficult issue because even saying nothing can often leave a false impression.⁴

But I will not be too hard on such speech because as J. Douma said it, "Politeness is an air cushion; there's nothing inside, but it absorbs life's bumps."⁵

But there are two other kinds of lying that I think the Bible speaks directly to: There are the self-serving lies and the lies against your neighbor.

Self-serving Lies

We lie to impress people. In 1993 when the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey ran a help-wanted ad for electricians with expertise at using Sontag connectors, it got 170 responses even though there is no such thing as a Sontag connector. The Port Authority ran the ad to find out

how many applicants falsify their resumes.⁶ Exaggeration as a form of speech can be properly used but when we use it to give a false impression, for our own aggrandizement, it is a lie. We not only lie to impress others but we lie to escape punishment or embarrassment. From early childhood to adulthood we will deceive in order to avoid the consequences of our actions.

And sometimes we lie to make a profit. Whether it's a garage sale, the number of hours we invested at work, expense accounts, you name it, we are tempted to deceive. A woman, coming home from work, stopped at the corner deli to buy a chicken for supper. The butcher reached below the counter, grabbed the last chicken he had, flung it on the scale, and told the woman its weight. She thought for a moment. "I really need a bit more chicken than that," she said. "Do you have any larger ones?" Without a word, the butcher put the chicken back into the cooler, groped around as though finding another, pulled the same chicken out, and placed it on the scales. "This chicken weighs one pound more," he announced. The woman pondered her options and then said, "Okay. I'll take them both."⁷

Come to think of it, that kind of lying is also stealing, forbidden in the 8th commandment.

Lying Against Your Neighbor

But I'm convinced there is yet another kind of lie, which the Commandment is dealing with primarily. The commandment says, "*Don't give false testimony against your neighbor.*" This moves the Commandment out of the abstraction of lying into the concrete prohibition of the specific kinds of words that harm another. This is the kind of lie the harness-maker, in my earlier story, told about the peasant. It was a lie that harms another. Obviously the commandment prohibits saying or implying any untrue, damaging thing about another. This is the situation where

the report is made up and the speaker knows it.

But just as obviously wrong is the retelling of a false report. To refrain from lying is not only to refrain from making up something that is untrue but also to refrain from retelling it if we hear it. Not as obviously this includes a prohibition of telling or retelling a **truth** about someone when the effect is to demean their reputation. Many things that are true are none-the-less gossip and slander when the effect of them is another's hurt.

"I need to tell you something in confidence..."

"This has been secret for a long time but I think you should know that..."

"I know how much we all respect so-and-so, but can you believe..."

We say, "I didn't mean to hurt them." Nonsense! We knew exactly what we were doing—the words are hurtful and harmful to the other.

***How do we change? First, we go
to the Word of God.***

One man wrote, "We indulge in this by making ourselves the people who are always right, making ourselves the people who always do good; we are the people, we say, who are always having injustices done to us, but who never do injustices to other people! For all lies are not just things which crop up occasionally and pass through us without affecting us; they are an expression of what we are, and as such they mold our lives, quite literally making **us** into a lie!"⁸ Luther said there is a great difference between knowing about (another's) sin and talking about (another's) sin.⁹ We don't have to pass it on even if it is true.

It is equally wrong to receive a bad report, without

examination, as it is to give it. Thomas Watson wrote, "He who tells it carries the devil in his tongue and he who hears it carries the devil in his ear."¹⁰ Judging without the facts, jumping to conclusions, or assuming something is true without full knowledge are forms of lying even if it is to ourselves. Most of the time no one requires us to pass judgment but we still do. So often, even in our hearing, we accuse, we prosecute and we pass sentence all in one fell swoop.

Even failing to tell the truth about someone can be as lying. You can wrong another by silence as well as by slander.¹¹ Leviticus 5:1 says, *"If a person sins because he does not speak up when he hears a public charge to testify regarding something he has seen or learned about, he will be held responsible."* I think we can sum it up this way: Better I should steal my neighbor's possessions than steal his reputation. Some would not think of taking a man's life but not hesitate to take his good name.

This slander, this malicious gossip, this lying, this false testimony, comes so naturally to us. How do we change that? First, we go to the Word of God, so that God's definitions of lying penetrate our consciences so we have a basis for evaluating our words. And secondly, we go to the Word of God, so that God's Spirit can use His Word to change us. 1 Peter 2:1-3 says, *"Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation..."*

God's expectation is that His Word will not only show us our guilt but will empower us for good. Look at Ephesians 4:25-28: *"Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body... Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may*

benefit those who listen... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Secondly, in addition to digesting God's word, we must also see the damage lying does; we must know that lying is not an insignificant matter. There is the story of a pastor in a farming community who had been falsely accused of a scandalous act. The story spread quickly with such opening phrases as: "Have you heard about the pastor?" "Can you believe it?" "You'd never guess it to look at him would you?" "His poor wife." After a time, however the rumor was found to be completely false but many people in the town who had believed it were reluctant to change their opinion thinking, "There must have been some truth to it or why would everybody believe it?"

Weeks later the couple who had started the malicious rumor went to the pastor and confessed their sin asking his forgiveness. The pastor said he would certainly forgive them but he also wished for them to do something for him. He asked them to butcher one of their chickens and collect all the feathers in a bag. Then they were to walk through the town dropping feathers as they went and finally they were to climb the water tower in the center of the city and scatter the remaining feathers in the wind. "Will you do this for me?" he asked. Mystified, they somewhat reluctantly agreed. Just as they were about to leave, the pastor asked yet another favor of them. "When you have finished will you please take the bag and go all over town picking up all the feathers you have dropped? Be careful to get all of them." It was then that the couple realized the point of the pastor's odd request and they hung their heads in shame realizing they could never undo the damage that had been done.¹²

Thirdly, to stop our lying ways, we must pray for a love for

others that will want only their good. The surest way to keep from speaking ill is to love them; we would never use life-damaging words against our own sons or daughters. Might that be true of our brothers and sisters in the Lord. 1 Corinthians 13:5-7 says, Love *"is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects..."*

Fourthly, to keep from lying, we ask for the Spirit's power to control our tongues. Psalm 141:3 says, *"Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips."* Thomas Watson said the tongue has three fences to keep it where it belongs: the teeth, the lips and the 9th Commandment.¹³

The 10 Commandments begin with God saying, *"I am the LORD your God who brought you out of slavery."* God has freed them and us to be able to live differently. Lying comes so easily to us; it is in the genes of our sinful nature inherited from our father the devil. But when we are born again, a new power indwells us; we have a new Father, our God, who enables us to do what is from Him.

Earlier I wrote of John Lennon's song *Imagine*. I want you to imagine something very different:

Imagine a family and a church where people only spoke well of each other and others. Ephesians 4:29 said, speaking *"only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."*

Imagine that, apart from those times when we are responsible for making decisions about putting people in places of authority or are responsible for the discipline of others in the home, church or employment, imagine we committed to never again saying or even insinuating a negative thing about another person.

Imagine if gone were the sarcasms, the jokes with an edge, the negative comments either outright or in the guise of concern or even in the guise of prayer requests.

Imagine if, when treated unjustly, we spoke only to the person who has offended us and then only if absolutely necessary. Imagine!

I leave you with three statements:

“There is nothing more contrary to God than a lie.”

Better I should steal my neighbor’s possessions than steal his reputation for he is made in the image of God.

Exodus 20:16: *"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor."*

End Notes

¹ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 170

² CNN, Oct 29, 2005

³ Michael Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom*, p. 226

⁴ See J. Douma, Luther and Augustine on these three kinds of lying.

⁵ Jochem Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 332

⁶ www.horizonsnet.org/sermons

⁷ In Chuck Jones sermon at www.horizonsnet.org/sermons

⁸ M.E. Andrews, “Falsehood and Truth” in *Interpretation*, 17 (1963), 436

⁹ Douma, *Ibid*, p. 317

¹⁰ Watson, *Ibid*, p. 169

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 173

¹² Ron Mehl, *The Ten(der) Commandments*, p. 211

¹³ Watson, *Ibid*, p. 169

Chapter Twelve

The Heart of Commandment Keeping Exodus 20:17

1 Kings 21:1-16:

"Some time later there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. Ahab said to Naboth, 'Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth.' But Naboth replied, 'The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.' So Ahab went home, sullen and angry because Naboth the Jezreelite had said, 'I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers.' He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat.

"His wife Jezebel came in and asked him, 'Why are you so sullen? Why won't you eat?' He answered her, 'Because I said to Naboth the Jezreelite, "Sell me your vineyard; or if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard in its place." But he said, "I will not give you my vineyard."

"Jezebel his wife said, 'Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.' So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, placed his seal on them, and sent them to the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city with him. In those letters she wrote: 'Proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people. But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them testify that he has cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death.'

"So the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city did as Jezebel directed in the letters she had written to them...As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned to death, she said to Ahab, 'Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite that he refused to sell you. He is no longer alive, but dead.' When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth's vineyard."

Evil Ahab. His own covetous heart pulled him along. He was "sullen and angry" and he "sulked and refused to eat." He was overcome with desire. He could think of nothing else but that piece of land and when thwarted in his effort to acquire it, he was angry and almost sick. I have watched it in my son. He sees something that attracts him, he wants it, he fixes his mind on it, he won't talk about anything else, he plans how to get it, he parries every argument against getting it, he works feverishly to get sufficient money to purchase it, he sulks when the money isn't acquired fast enough, he's angry when he is refused immediate gratification, and his greed knows no shame. I have watched other children, and my own, spy something they want that another child has. When younger, and least able, they will simply try to use raw power to get it. But when they are a little older they will plot, then distract and deceive, and then take. Oh, Ahab, your kind is still with us.

Greed, envy and covetousness are all bound together. Greed is that insatiable desire for more. Envy is that resentful awareness of the other's advantage. Coveting is that powerful desire to get what belongs to another. God has said in Exodus 20:17, *"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."* Covet? Who me?

Have we not all felt that twinge of envy as we observed the prosperity of someone else?

Have we not all been somewhat offended when someone else gets what we think we deserve?

Have we not often found ourselves unable to truly rejoice with another when they, the same age, education, and experience, get more than we get?

Have we not all experienced the quickening of our pulses when we look at advertisements or when certain images appear on the television screen?

Oh, it comes in varying degrees but we've all felt it.

Coveting at its rawest is a burning, compelling, almost visceral, desperate desire that seems to take over. We identify with that raw, coveting most easily when it is sexual—we see a picture or a person and we crave! And it is most powerful when what we want is not ours to have.

- Isaiah said we *"burn with lust"* (Isaiah 57:5)
- Paul spoke of it as *"inflamed with lust"* (Romans 1:27)
- Again he spoke of it as *"Having lost all sensitivity, (we give ourselves) over to sensuality..."* (Ephesians 4:19)
- Jeremiah somewhat crudely likened it to an animal in "heat." (Jeremiah 2)

But coveting may not always be that out-of-control desire. Sometimes it may be a very quiet, calculated, deliberate and even patient direction of the mind and heart. It becomes a settled direction of one's life—to get and to get it even if at our neighbor's expense.

One author wrote, "Ours is an age in which the appetite for more and more seems almost impossible to assuage. We find it increasingly difficult to maintain any sense of balance regarding our use of food; gadgets for home, office or

auto; clothing; entertainment, or recreational goods and equipment.”¹

Many of you have already seen the 2005 version of the movie, “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.” I’m sure you know it is based on the children’s book of the same title written by C.S. Lewis. Surely Edmund’s controlling desire for Turkish Delight even at the expense of selling out his siblings, qualifies as covetousness.

If you have read much about the Englishman Lewis or have even seen the excellent movie about his life, “Shadowlands,” you know that he married an American woman by the name of Joy Davidman. Davidman was also a writer and has written a provocative book on the 10 Commandments called *Smoke on the Mountain*, which is

This command does not prohibit all desire. What is prohibited is a self-centered, self-obsessed, lust for our own advantage that disregards others.

well worth reading. She says, “Most of us are modest enough in our demands. We reject the disease of greed, the perversion that turns a decent little shopkeeper into a recluse, dead of hunger on a mattress stuffed with ten-dollar bills; (or) the kind of greed that turns a cheerful girl in a shabby coat into a fretful neurotic in diamonds and mink... These we feel are exceptions and mental cases. *We* would never be like that. We just want a standard of living that will enable us to maintain our self-respect. We’ve no (expectation of) a Cadillac – we’ll be satisfied with a Chevy, for this year at least; and of course we’ve got to buy a (HDTV), but that only because the kids are so humiliated (when inviting their friends to our house)...”²

One man calls coveting, a “sidelong glance” wherein we compare what others have with what we have.³ We don’t

really mind if our neighbor has something, as long as he doesn't have more than we do or, more likely, as long as we have just a little more. One of Aesop's fables tells of a man who was informed he could have anything he wished as long as he was willing for his neighbor to have twice as much of it. The man was so driven by envy that he wished to have one of his own eyes put out.⁴

But God said, "You shall not covet..." Please understand this command does not prohibit all desire. This is not stoicism, asceticism, or Buddhism's Nirvana with the loss of all desire. It is right for a young man to desire a young woman. One can desire food or crave warmth when cold. It isn't that we are to be passionless but that we control our minds and bodies rather than them controlling us. Paul called it self-control in 1 Timothy 3. What is prohibited is a self-centered, self-obsessed, lust for our own advantage that disregards others—even if those "others," those "neighbors" live on the other side of the world.

It seems that God placed the commandments hardest to keep at the beginning and the end. In fact the two are quite similar:

- The first says, "You shall have no other gods before me."

The last says "Don't covet" or in essence, "Don't set your affections on something else and think it will satisfy you."

- The first is about trusting and serving God alone.

The last is about trusting and serving something else.

- The first is about God being God in our lives.

The last is about something else being god in our lives.

In the Garden of Eden the Serpent said, "If you just could have that, you would be as gods." And in a moment Adam and Eve switched allegiance from God to things. Their fundamental belief shifted to believe that more would somehow bring satisfaction. All people since have the same basic conviction that when we and all people have enough then we will become contented, peaceful, loving and just individuals.⁵

So from the very beginning that lust for more has driven people. Not a lot more, after all we're not greedy; just a little more. D. R. Davies wrote, "Poverty has been promoted to be the chief evil of human existence... Men can no longer be judged to be poor by what they consume, but by what they think they should consume and do not... Even though their bellies be bursting with chicken, the vast majority of people would still be poor if a minority of bellies were bursting with turkey."⁶ And so we covet.

What do you covet?

- Are you longing for a relationship with someone who happens to be someone else's spouse?
- Do you want the respect and the reputation that belongs to another person?
- Do you see what someone else has and long for it for yourself?
- Have you been so determined to get what you long for that you were willing to mortgage the future with debt?

A few hundred years ago the Puritan pastor, Thomas Watson said we are covetous when:⁷ our thoughts are largely taken up with acquisitions. We think mainly of getting, saving, spending, etc. Our lives are largely given to planning, plotting and projecting how we can get. What do you most think about?

Another sign of covetous is when we spend more effort getting things or position than pursuing the Kingdom of God. We will wear ourselves out pursuing the things we want but will give only passing attention or effort to the things that last forever. As Watson said it, such a man "hunts for the world, he only wishes for heaven." Michael Horton said, "We are suckers for the latest products promising the latest cure for what the world has decided to be our latest problem (or need)."⁸ Whether it is work, recreation or just leisure, it is given more time and energy than the Kingdom of God. What gets your best investment?

We are also covetous when our conversation **is mostly about our needs and wants**. Our hearts are betrayed by what we talk about most. Jesus said in Luke 6:45, "*For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.*" What do you talk about most?

And we are covetous when we will stoop to unlawful or just unethical means to get what we want. When we succumb to the temptations to cut corners, to pad expense accounts, and not to declare income, covetousness has taken hold.

All of the other commandments except the first and last speak of an action we take, or do not take, that is sin.

- You shall not make an idol
- You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God
- Remember the Sabbath.
- Honor your father and mother.
- You shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, or bear false witness

It is true that each of them speaks not only to action but also by implication to motivation, but this commandment, "You shall not covet" goes deepest into our hearts, to the

very bottom—not what we do but what motivates us to do. This commandment is speaking of that scheming of the heart; the very plotting in our hearts that leads us to break the other commandments.

Martin Luther wrote, “This last commandment is addressed not to those whom the world considers wicked rogues, but precisely to the most upright—to people who wish to be commended as honest and virtuous because they have not offended against the preceding commandments.”⁹ Remember the man who came to Jesus, who asked in Matthew 19:16-22, “*Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?*’

Jesus replied, ‘If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.’

‘Which ones?’ the man inquired.

Jesus replied, ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself.’

‘All these I have kept,’ the young man said. ‘What do I still lack?’

Jesus answered, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.”

I’m sure you, too, hear it; the problem was not in the man’s actions—he’d kept eight of the Commandments—the problem was in his heart—in the 10th Commandment. Jan Lochman wrote, “The 10th Commandment is no mere appendix to the Decalogue...It uncovers the invisible mass of the iceberg of sin (under the surface of our hearts); it seeks to illuminate the ‘dark cellars’ of our houses of bondage, to unmask the hidden impulses and

(machinations) of our lust for possession and power. It is a summons for us to look into our own hearts and inner inclinations..."¹⁰

Sin is an unpopular word in our culture because it suggests a negative predisposition of the human personality rather than how we prefer to think of ourselves as having a basic goodness. But that fundamental issue is one to which the Scriptures speak extensively as in Jeremiah 17:9 where God declares, "*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.*" The 10th Commandment is getting at the real us beneath our actions. Coveting isn't wrong only after taking a neighbor's field or his spouse—it is wrong in the very attitude. Jesus, recalling the 10 Commandments, said in Matthew 15:19, "*For out of the **heart** come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.*" (Emphasis Added) True obedience then includes not only refraining from certain actions but also refraining from even wanting to.

One author wrote that there are four stages of desire:

The initial desire

Dwelling on the desire

Developing a plan to satisfy the desire

Acting out the plan.¹¹

King Ahab, in the account I cited at the beginning of the message, experienced all of this, with the help of his wife. He desired, he dwelled on it, they developed a plan and took what they wanted. So did King David who demonstrated this in his sin with Bathsheba. He glanced, he gaped and he got. The 10th Commandment prohibits the gapping, that which lies somewhere between the initial desire and the acting out.¹² Or to cite Luther's oft-quoted advice, "You can't stop the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your

hair.”

But how do I do this, how do I avoid this propensity of my soul to covet? How, especially when our whole culture seems to be built on greed? Many, from leaders of businesses to coaches of athletic teams, will tell us that greed is necessary, even good. We sometimes think of it as the grease that makes the wheels of commerce and competition turn more freely. It has become part of the very fabric of our culture as witnessed by our entertainment, game shows, gambling, much advertising, and more.

So what do I do? I start with recognizing this sin for what it is—as even more of a problem for me than any of the other commandments, save the first. The Apostle Paul said in Romans 7:7-8, *"Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet.' But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire."* Contrary to the idea that knowing the law would help Paul keep the law, Paul said the law only made him more aware of his sin as something deeper than actions—as something in his very nature.

So I must recognize that while I may in my own strength control some of my actions, I find it impossible to alone control my heart. And so I run to the Savior to cleanse me and, as King David said it, “create in me a pure heart, O God!” I recognize my complete dependence on Him. And in the midst of that I recognize that the question is quite simply, “What or who do I trust?” Do I trust God or do I trust possessions and position more?

Coveting finds a foothold because I don’t trust God. I covet because I think God is unfair in the distribution of things. I covet because I think getting what I want will provide satisfaction. No wonder God calls greed, idolatry

(Colossians 3:5)—I am looking to something else to supply what only God can.¹³ And I am dissatisfied with God's provision. Someone rightly said, "To covet is to deny God's providence."¹⁴ We hear that denial in our prayers: We come to God not because we love Him but because we love our possessions and we think maybe we need to keep asking Him to help us keep them. And in that, Joy Davidman wrote, "we are still seeking God not for himself but so that we can hire him as night watchman (of our) mammon (our goods)."¹⁵

***I must recognize that while I may
in my own strength control some of my
actions, I find it impossible to alone
control my heart.***

The antidote to covetousness is trust: to be content with God and what He supplies. And again, contentment is not absence of feeling or caring.

- It doesn't mean I don't recognize that some have more than I have.
- It doesn't mean that I wouldn't prefer the situation were different.

But it does mean I can be content with God's provision in the moment and not controlled by my desire for more. It is confidence in God. I can place first things first and keep perspective on what is most important. Michael Horton wrote, "At the bottom, this final commandment calls us to the conviction that God is good and that even our suffering or lack serves an ultimately benevolent purpose."¹⁶

Proverbs 19:23 says, "*The fear (the trust) of the LORD leads to life: Then one rests content, untouched by trouble.*" To fear God means to recognize Him as the ultimate reality. This is no exaggeration; I often ask myself,

"Jerry, do you believe God is truly there?" "Do you believe He is fully sovereign and wholly benevolent toward you?" "Do you trust Him?" The Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians, *"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength...And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."*(4:11-13, 19)

Standard wisdom would say that we fight covetousness in these ways:

- First, don't dwell on those things that make you covet. If Costco or Neiman Marcus stir up your greed, go less often. If your neighbor's wife makes your heart beat faster, stay away.
- Second, immediately take every temptation to God in prayer. When covetousness rears its ugly head, stop and pray, asking God's help.
- Third, be accountable to others for the weaknesses in your life.

These are good ideas but there is a better way. You see, you can keep building higher levees to keep the water out or you can move to higher ground. What keeps you from adultery? Is it lack of courage, fear of consequences or is it contentment with what God has given you? What keeps you from stealing? Is it fear of consequences or is it a trust in God that leads to contentment with what He has provided? The only way to ultimately conquer a covetous spirit is to go on the offensive and cultivate deeper desires than the ones that have been so tempting.¹⁷ Matthew 6:31-33 says, *"So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the*

*pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But **seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.***" (Emphasis Added) Someone else's spouse won't be so tempting if you will love your own. You won't covet someone else's job, house, or 401k if you are invested in using what God has already given you to advance the kingdom of God—charity squelches covetousness. You won't covet someone else's position or abilities if you are busy using what God has already given you.

One man wrote, "Contentment...is the grateful, faithful, fruitful use of what we have, little or much. It is to take the cup of Providence, and call upon the name of the Lord...To get all that is in the cup is the act and art of contentment. Not to drink because one has but half a cup, or because one does not like its flavor, or because somebody else has silver to one's own glass, is to lose the contents; and that is the penalty, if not the meaning, of discontent." A woman declared, "It is not our circumstances that create our discontent or contentment. It is us." At root the issue is what or who do I trust? What do your fears say in answer to that question? "I have to have a little more!"

And what does God say? "*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*" (Exodus 20:2) Don't reenter the prison of your own insatiable lusts. Trust me! I am the LORD your God. I have redeemed you, you are Mine and I will never leave you nor forsake you. Psalm 111:10 says, "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.*"

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (Exodus 20:17)

End Notes

¹ W. Harrelson, in Fretheim, *Exodus*, p. 238

² Joy Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain*, p. 125

³ Jan Lochman, *Signposts to Freedom*, p. 151

⁴ <http://www.mythfolklore.net/aesopica/oxford/162.htm>

⁵ Davidman, *Ibid*, p. 117

⁶ D.R. Davies *The Sin of our Age*, in Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain*, p. 124

⁷ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 175-6

⁸ Michael Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom*, p. 251

⁹ Luther's Large Catechism

¹⁰ Lochman, *Ibid*, p. 153

¹¹ J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 340

¹² *Ibid*, p. 341

¹³ Davidman, *Ibid*, p. 123

¹⁴ <http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/exodus/>

¹⁵ Davidman, *Ibid*, p. 127

¹⁶ Horton, *Ibid*, p. 244

¹⁷ Brian Morgan, <http://www.pbcc.org/sermons/morgan/1487.html>

