

Honoring the Ten Commandments: Monument or Movement?

Students Guide



13 online adult Sunday school lessons

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An Honoring the Ten Commandments: Monument or Movement? Leaders Guide is also available from Acacia Resources (www.acaciaresources.com).

Preface

What a tragedy it will be if all many people ever know about the Ten Commandments comes from debate over where they can be displayed.

Yet that is likely. The Ten Commandments have gotten unusually wide press in recent years because of the efforts of some people to adorn public buildings with them in the form of plaques, monuments and other decorative displays. Doing so “acknowledges God,” they say.

The whole world will in fact be better, some think, if they prominently and widely display the Ten Commandments and remind people of how they are supposed to behave. The mere presence of the words will somehow miraculously and quickly reverse moral decline.

Where one stands on the issue of displaying the Ten Commandments has become yet another litmus test some Christians use to separate the righteous and the unrighteous. Those who argue against publicly displaying the commandments simply do not love the Bible, or love it enough, they assert.

Lifting the Ten Commandments, part of a larger sacred document and story, out of their context reveals incomplete understanding of them and God's purpose in giving them. It lessens, rather than strengthens, their impact.

The Ten Commandments are not powerful because they are part of a public display. Neither are they powerless if governments or individuals fail to acknowledge them.

What does God intend for us to do about the Ten Commandments today? How do we best value them?

First, we should recognize their extreme significance. Of them, scripture says, “God spoke all these words” (Ex 20:1). When God speaks, we ought to pay attention.

God gave the commandments at a momentous time in the life of God’s people, relatively early in their history. These commandments form a crucial marker, one we should not ignore.

Next, the Ten Commandments hold powerful meaning because of who God is and what God has done. God and God’s acts are unparalleled and unprecedented. God deserves and demands our undivided loyalty. God alone has authority to speak to us like this.

Because God is God and God is love, God can and does demand certain ways of living from us. The God who created life knows best how that life should be lived. God knows that we live best when we follow these commands. We and the broader community suffer the consequences when we do not.

Of supreme importance is that we properly and rightly acknowledge and worship God. It matters how we speak to and about God. Attaching God’s name to something carelessly and with impure motives carries serious consequences.

Life is best, God says, when we find the proper balance between work and rest. We can help build the kind of families and communities God desires when we honor and respect people, value their lives and personhood, respect their property and their right to own it, speak truthfully and repress unbridled desires.

Additionally, we should remember that the Ten Commandments were important to Jesus. On one occasion, he

summarized them this way: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt 22:37-40).

Jesus did nothing to discount or disparage the Ten Commandments. The ways he related to God and to other people show us the value he placed on them. His quarrels about the Law came when those who closely guarded it placed it ahead of people and their needs, when the Law, not love, motivated attitudes and actions.

We need to understand the Ten Commandments because God gave them and Jesus affirmed them. People of faith honor and best keep them when we live lives that uphold them, reflecting the love of the God who spoke them and the Christ who modeled them in their purest form.

Where do the Ten Commandments belong? Everywhere we go.

How should we display them? Through lives of love, grace, mercy, justice, peace, forgiveness, prayer, sacrifice and service.

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor for Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Toward a Moral Way of Life

Exodus 18:13-26

Theme: This age of moral confusion and competing values challenges us to sharpen our moral way of living.

Introduction

Evariste Ahimana walks up the hill every week on the way to church, passing the house of Issa Munyambabazi, the brother of a man Ahimana killed in the genocide that raged across Rwanda.

Released from prison, Ahimana has never apologized to Munyambabazi.

“I’m planning to say sorry one day,” Ahimana told the *L.A. Times*. “It’s not so much reluctance to go as lack of strength.”

Ahimana blames the Hutu mob for sweeping him into the action that caused him to take the life of his neighbor.

“It’s very hard to reconcile with someone who has not said sorry,” Munyambabazi said. “If they’re not saying sorry, why shouldn’t we go and take revenge?”

Survivors and perpetrators of genocide across Rwanda are trying to cobble together a new way of life in a country where neighbors killed neighbors, leaving 1 million people dead.

Known as a predominately Christian country, Rwanda saw itself descend into brutal anarchy a decade ago, while the international community stood by—and watched.

Rwanda offers an extreme example of the collapse of moral order, and the seemingly impossible journey toward creating a new moral life.

Of course, Rwanda represents but one example of the cruelty that can arise from within nations, even nations where Christian values are widespread, churches are plentiful and leaders parade their piety.

Some in the United States claim that the nation’s moral fabric is tearing away. They blame Hollywood, the courts, the media, public education. They declare that the nation is undergoing an era of anti-religious activity, a period of “anti-evangelical bigotry,” “a drizzle of persecution.” Their first solution to combating this perceptive hostility is to assert that the nation’s heritage is Christian. Their second step is to advocate the posting of the Ten Commandments in public buildings to stop the nation’s slide into immorality.

Their perception about persecution is certainly questionable and their solution is definitely faulty.

What is surely true is that Christian morality has its foundations in commandments that God gave Moses in the Sinai. We refer to them as the Ten Commandments, although the biblical witness seldom does. We see these commandments as divine directives by which to live. We think these broad commands should be kept ever before our eyes, and thereby, they will help to advance a loving community.

“These moral injunctions are the commands of God,” wrote Baptist ethicist professor Henlee Barnette. “They constitute

... eternal, universal values indispensable for the fulfillment of the individual and society.”

The Biblical Witness

Before we look individually at the Ten Commandments in subsequent lessons, we need to look at the context in which the commandments arose. Understanding the context enables us to appreciate more fully the texts themselves.

The people of Israel had been slaves in Egypt. They lived under oppressive conditions in the world’s most civilized nation. They cried out to God for deliverance (Ex 2:23-25). God heard their groaning and “took notice of them” (v 25). God then called Moses, who eventually led the people from slavery to freedom, from an imposed order to a reorganized society, from predictability to uncertainty.

Soon after the people of Israel escaped from bondage in Egypt, they murmured against Moses (Ex 16:2). They faulted his leadership (Ex 17:2-3). From sunrise to sunset, they presented him with their problems and expected him to settle their conflicts (Ex 18:13). Perhaps the particulars of their disagreements mattered less than their dissatisfaction with their condition. They were an unhappy, conflicted lot. They were hardly a cohesive nation. They were a people being formed into a nation, a new people with a new way of life.

Exodus 18:13-16

What Is This That You Are Doing?

¹³The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening.

¹⁴When Moses’ father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, “What is this that you are doing for

the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?” ¹⁵Moses said to his father-in-law, “Because the people come to me to inquire of God. ¹⁶When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God.

When Moses first fled from Egypt, he entered the land of Midian, where he came to the defense of seven sisters who were drawing water from a well. Hearing about Moses’ intervention, the girls’ father, Jethro, whose name meant “abundance,” extended his hospitality to Moses. He gave one of his daughters, Zipporah, to Moses as a wife (Ex 2:11-22).

After Moses fled a second time from Egypt, albeit with the people of Israel, Jethro took Moses his wife Zipporah and their two sons (Ex 18:5).

While he was with Moses, he observed Moses’ heavy load of decision-making. He commented on Moses’ leadership with two questions: what are you doing and why are you doing it (v 14).

Moses replied that he was doing two things. First, he was settling disputes. Second, he was teaching the people “the statutes and instructions of God” (v 16).

Having lived for so long in Egypt, the people needed a new understanding of God’s ways. When Moses taught the Hebrews “the statutes,” he was inscribing or engraving God’s way on their hearts and minds. The word for “instructions” carried the idea of “God’s law.” Moses was sharing with the people about his understanding of God’s way, even though the Ten Commandments had yet not been given.

Exodus 18:17-23

Teach Them the Statutes

¹⁷Moses' father-in-law said to him. "What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. ¹⁹Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; ²⁰teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. ²¹You should also look for able men among the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. ²²Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. ²³If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace."

Jethro told Moses that his approach was "not good" (v 17). It was too demanding and promised to wear down Moses. From Jethro's perspective, the problem was one of shared leadership and organization, not the content of Moses' decisions.

He urged Moses to look for those who could help him and who had four characteristics (v 21). First was the term "able," which may refer to physical strength or bravery. Second was reverence for God. Third was trustworthiness, literally meaning "men of truth." Fourth was honesty—abhorring bribery and dishonest gain.

These leaders were divided into a system of courts with Moses serving as a kind of chief justice.

Moses' additional role was to serve as a spiritual and moral leader (vv 19-20). Jethro said that Moses (1) "should represent the people before God;" (2) "teach them the statutes and instructions;" and (3) "make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do." The phrase "the way" related to the path of moral character.

Jethro said that if Moses reorganized his responsibility and organized a new judicial system, then he would be able to endure this demanding time of nation-building. Equally important, Jethro said, "All these people will go to their home in peace" (v 23).

Exodus 18:24-26

They Judged the People

²⁴So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. ²⁵Moses chose able men from all Israel and appointed them as heads over the people, as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. ²⁶And they judged the people at all times; hard cases they brought to Moses, but any minor case they decided themselves.

Moses saw his father-in-law's abundant organizational wisdom and implemented his plan. He selected judges, made appointments and took the tough cases. He set up a legal system to discern between right and wrong, while he taught the people a moral way of life (v 20).

Before God's provision of the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:2-17), God's people sought to live morally. They wanted a fair society. They wanted justice. They recognized the need for others to help them discern between right and

wrong. God's servant saw the need for both moral organization (based in part on a reverence for God) and moral instruction.

In some ways, Moses' actions underscored the need for moral clarity within the emerging nation of Israel which would come profoundly from the Ten Commandments. The people's plight and Moses' initiatives served as a preamble to God's mighty act on Mount Sinai and the subsequent long journey toward a moral way of life.

Toward a Moral Way of Life

Rwandans are struggling today to rebuild their nation. Survivors await the repentance of the perpetrators and justice for their evil deeds. Many perpetrators fail to offer genuine remorse and demonstrate an inability to take responsibility for their gruesome actions. It is a knotty time.

To advance national healing, the Rwandan government has established community tribunals in which perpetrators must face the survivors of their genocidal rage. At best, such an organizational approach is a beginning to creating a moral way of life.

"Genocide is a crime that never dies. It's a crime that haunts you," said Fatuma Ntangiza, head of the country's unity and reconciliation commission. "We think that slowly, slowly, the truth will come out. It's better than keeping quiet because discovering the truth is a process."

Americans, too, want a moral community that advances truthfulness and goodness. Our domestic situation differs from that in Rwanda. While we have not in recent history practiced genocide, we do have a flawed history of treatment of people of color.

Even today, we witness too many sexually and racially motivated hate crimes. We hear of too many school shootings. We know too many stories about corporate greed and deceit. We wonder too often about the integrity of our leaders. What we see in our land differs from our deepest longing for a good society.

From the Judeo-Christian vantage point, advancing a more moral life begins with both reverence for God and respect for other human beings.

The famous biblical scholar William Barclay noted that the Ten Commandments are divided into two sections: (1) the supremacy of God; and (2) well-being of human beings.

Barclay wrote that both Judaism and Christianity "have a two-directional look. They look both to God and to man. They recognize a duty to God and to man. They both know that a man must love God with every part and fiber of his being and that he must also love his neighbor as himself."

Without the godward look, Barclay warned, nations see human beings become things—things are more easily devalued, damaged, discharged. Without a "manward" look, human beings tend toward spiritual detachment and moral disinterest. A moral way of life recognizes the "two-directional look."

A moral way of life also acknowledges the need for simplicity without shallowness, clarity without complexity.

The biblical witness repeatedly underscores moral simplicity. Moses had a short-list of moral qualifications for judges. The Ten Commandments were an easy-to-memorize series of principles, which children learned by using their ten

fingers. The prophet Amos said, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.” Jesus said, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.”

These high points in moral development show us the way. Our responsibility is to work out the details, the system of implementation for a just society.

The biblical witness also recounts the human habit of making moral clarity complicated, burdensome, an end in itself rather than a means to moral well-being. The Israelites developed hundreds of laws. The early church fought over the strict adherence to regulations as qualification for inclusion.

Our task in the weeks ahead is to learn the rich meaning of the Ten Commandments and to seek to integrate them into our daily life.

Written by Robert Parham, executive director, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Approaching the Ten Commandments with Care

Exodus 19:1-20:2a

Theme: We honor the Ten Commandments when we study them and integrate them into our daily lives.

Introduction

“Today in America every idea or creed or lifestyle that has ever existed is laid out before us, as if spread on a giant buffet, a never-ending post-graduate course,” said Larry Harvey, founder of Burning Man, a week-long experimental community of art, nudity and self-expression held in Black Rock Desert.

Begun 18 years ago, Burning Man is a “proto-apocalyptic, hippie neo-pagan freakfest,” according to Harvey. It is “Disneyland in reverse.”

“We live in an eclectic age. There’s no defining paradigm, no single idea to unite us,” he said in an interview about postmodernism.

“Your neighbor is a pagan, his roommate’s an existentialist, and the guy down the street is a born-again Christian. So what? It’s strictly a matter of personal taste, of lifestyle,” said Harvey.

In a culture of stranded individuals with nothing around which to rally, people gather each year for a week before Labor Day weekend in the Northern Nevada desert, seek-

ing a techo-spiritual experience. They camp around “The Man,” an object that is burned to the ground at the climax of the event.

“I think we need a unifying symbol that’s accessible to a diverse array of people. Our world is multicultural. People need an experience which both transcends these differences and respects them. That’s where Burning Man comes in,” said Harvey. “We share no single belief today. There is no dominant ideology in our society. But Burning Man is not about belief. It’s an immediate experience which transcends any culture-bound concept.”

Almost 30,000 people watched last year’s burning of an 80-foot temple—The Man. More people are expected to experience Burning Man this year.

Running counter to Burning Man is another rallying point that seeks to establish a cultural core. This effort asserts moral absolutes and advocates the use of government power to promote the Ten Commandments.

When Alabama’s chief justice, Roy Moore, placed a 5,300-pound monument of the Ten Commandments in the rotunda of his state’s judicial building one night, he set off an intense debate. Many of his supporters expressed the belief that the public posting of the Ten Commandments would reclaim the United States as a Christian nation and keep the nation from moral decline.

On one side of the cultural divide is a kind of state-sponsored moral legalism. On the other side is a kind of moral relativism.

In the middle are those of the free-church tradition who advocate the separation of church and state and who

support high moral values. Many contend that the best places to study the Ten Commandments are in the church and home, living them out in their own lives.

Unfortunately, too few people study the Ten Commandments and too few seek to integrate their values in daily life. Another, subtler problem is that too few people hold the Ten Commandments with a high sense of awe befitting their delivery to Moses.

The Biblical Witness

Not long after the Israelites escaped slavery in Egypt, they murmured against Moses’ leadership, complaining about the hardness of their living conditions. He, in turn, sought to resolve conflicts. He created a judicial system and taught the freed slaves the way they were to go and the things they were to do (Ex 18:20).

Moses’ task was doubly difficult. He was taking a slave people on both a geographical and sociological journey. He was leading them into a new land; he was shaping them into a new people with a new way of life.

Exodus 19:1-6 If You Obey, You Shall Be

¹On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ²They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. ³Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: ⁴You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and

brought you to myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.”

The LORD called Moses from the mountain, giving him another assignment. God told Moses to remind the people about the mighty act of liberation. Having heard the cries of the people living under oppressive conditions in the world’s most civilized nation, God “took notice” (2:25). God vanquished pharaoh and freed the slaves. God wanted Moses to remind the people of what the Almighty had recently done.

Such a clear disclosure of providence’s power led to a conditional promise: “if...then.” God said that if the people were obedient to God’s way, then the nation of Israel would become a “treasured possession.” Faithfulness led to becoming a set apart people.

God instructed Moses to deliver the reminder of freedom and the offer to uniqueness to the people.

Exodus 19:7-9a **We Will Do Everything**

⁷So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. ⁸The people all answered as one: “Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do.” Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD. ^{9a}Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.”

Moses called together the leaders and told them what God had said. The leaders accepted the conditional promise. Their agreement was rooted in what God had done in the exodus event. They agreed to be obedient to God’s way.

As the mediator between the elders of Israel and God, Moses returned to the mountain. He told the LORD that the leaders accepted his offer, his covenantal agreement.

Then God told Moses that he would appear in a “dense cloud,” in order that the people would know that Moses indeed was communicating with the divine. Such revelation was aimed at elevating Moses’ status, ensuring that the people would trust him.

Exodus 19:9b-15 **Become Holy**

^{9b}When Moses had told the words of the people to the LORD, ¹⁰the LORD said to Moses: “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes ¹¹and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the LORD will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ¹²You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, “Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death. ¹³No hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot with arrows; whether animal or human being, they shall not live.’ When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain.” ¹⁴So Moses went down from the mountain to the people. He consecrated the people, and they washed their clothes. ¹⁵And he said to the people, “Prepare for the third day; do not go near a woman.”

The LORD spoke again with Moses and told Moses to prepare the people for the Almighty's visible presence on the mountain in three days.

Between the LORD's instructions to Moses and his appearance on the mountain, the people were to become holy (v 10). They were to consecrate themselves. The Hebrew word meant to be holy, separate, hallowed.

To become holy, the people needed to do four things:

- They were to wash their clothes (v 10), which they did (v 14).
- They needed to know how dangerous it was to get too close to God. They were to stay away from the mountain's base. If they touched the mountain, they would be put to death.
- They were to abstain from sexual activity (v 15).
- They were to answer the call of the trumpet blast on the third day (v 13).

Exodus 19:16-25 **God Appeared in Fire and Smoke**

¹⁶On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. ¹⁷Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. ¹⁹As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. ²⁰When the LORD descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the

LORD summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. ²¹Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people not to break through to the LORD to look; otherwise many of them will perish. ²²Even the priests who approach the LORD must consecrate themselves or the LORD will break out against them." ²³Moses said to the LORD, "The people are not permitted to come up to Mount Sinai; for you yourself warned us, saying, 'Set limits around the mountain and keep it holy.' ²⁴The LORD said to him, "Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you; but do not let either the priests or the people break through to come up to the LORD; otherwise he will break out against them." ²⁵So Moses went down to the people and told them.

God appeared on the third day, coming in thunder, lightning, cloud, loudness, quaking earth, fire and smoke. The Almighty also disclosed himself in conversation with Moses. The divine was both immediately visible to senses of the people and completely obscure from their comprehension.

Moses again went up and down the mountain, talking to God and then to the people. At one moment, Moses was in the presence of the divine, hidden behind a veil of terrifying mystery and the warning of destruction. In the next moment, he was delivering instructions to ordinary human beings, warning them to keep their distance from God.

Such was the presence of God on the mountain—visible and hidden, source of destruction and hand of salvation. God kept his distance and drew the people to him. He called for consecration and cautioned against too much nearness to divine holiness.

Exodus 20:1-2a **I Am the Lord Your God**

¹Then God spoke all these words: ²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

Exodus 19 began with an account of how the people camped at the base of Mount Sinai three months after they had escaped from Egypt (19:1). There, they received a reminder through Moses that God had provided freedom from slavery (v 4). The story ended with another word about Egypt, the house of slavery (20:2a). Credit for the break-away from captivity was assigned to divine intervention.

Before the presentation of the Ten Commandments, God prompted the people to remember their life in bondage and their swift experience in the flight to freedom.

In hindsight, the hand of God was clear: With Egypt came exodus. With exodus came a conditional covenant. With conditional covenant came divine disclosure. With divine disclosure came consecration. With consecration came a new moral code. God replaced an old way of life with a new way. Divine covenant replaced Egyptian chains.

God prepared the people for the gift of the Ten Commandments, displaying the divine presence through the terrifying natural order and relaying the divine expectation for human preparation through multiple messages from Moses. Only then did God speak the Commandments.

A New Moral Order

Chapter 19 presses introductory questions to any consideration of the Ten Commandments:

- What should we conclude from the back and forth of the interchange between God and Moses?
- How should we read the frightening shows of nature’s power as expression of the divine?
- What should we make of the link between the sacredness of Mount Sinai and the requirement of human cleanliness and sexual abstinence?
- Why were the Ten Commandments delivered so early in the formation of a new nation?
- Does the intricate buildup to the delivery of the Ten Commandments suggest that we should handle these words with greater care?

It is the last question that deserves discussion today in cultural settings where folk so easily posture about promoting the Ten Commandments.

In many places, politicians, pundits and preachers claim moral decay is widespread and proclaim that posting the Ten Commandments in public buildings will restore moral decency.

Yet some of these folk are well-practiced in violating the very moral code they want others to obey. They make nationalism an expression of religiosity, ignoring the commandment against idolatry. They violate the Sabbath or make others violate it. They shun the elderly and bear false witness against their opponents. They harbor thoughts and attitudes that possessing what others have will give them more self-esteem or purpose.

Instead of glibly yammering about moral decline and posturing for state-sponsored moral legalism, perhaps we should step back and rethink the record of what happened before the delivery of these sacred words. The display of divine power and the power of the Ten Commandments in

defining the people of Israel tell us that we need to handle these words with care.

A beginning point is confession. How many of us can actually name the Ten Commandments? Would you be surprised to learn that a Gallup Poll found that only 42 percent of adults were able to name as many as five of the Commandments? Would you believe that a poll at a meeting of the Christian Booksellers Association found that only five percent of the respondents were able to name all ten?

Let us approach the Ten Commandments with more humility. Can we name them? Can we list them in order? Where are the Commandments posted in our own churches? Are they visible in our homes?

A second step is with the study of the Ten Commandments, reading each commandment with a sense of reverence for God's code of behavior.

A third step is to look first at our own thoughts and actions, and to evaluate our lives against these words.

Shall we now turn to the study of the Ten Commandments?

Written by Robert Parham, executive director, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Only God

Exodus 20:3

Theme: God demands complete and uncompromised loyalty.

Introduction

It is a very tired, old question. I must have been asked it in Sunday school dozens of times: What are the things we tend to place before God and, thus, worship as idols?

Money, status, houses, cars, popularity—these are the anticipated answers. The problem with such lists is that we tend to be making them for somebody else.

I have no idea what my idols are. I am afraid this is probably because they look like the real God to me.

In various religious traditions, Exodus 20:3 either is the first commandment, part of the first commandment or part of the second commandment. Whichever we choose, this simple statement can only be a beginning point for obedience to God. It begs the question: How do I keep from doing that? Jewish tradition enumerates 613 laws in the Torah. Christian tradition rejects most of these, but still exalts the Ten Commandments as a guide to a faithful life.

These laws are ancient, and the world from which they emerged was very different from our own, so when confronted with the commandment to have no other gods we resort to analogies of the type listed above.

Perhaps we are not supposed to draw such analogies. Being selfish and greedy do not exemplify worshipping money the same way that praying or bowing or giving offerings to a divine image do. Plenty of places in the Bible condemn greed without having to make the first commandment about such issues.

Can we keep this commandment focused squarely on our religious life? What does it say about how we orient our lives toward God?

The Biblical Witness

Exodus 20:3 The First Commandment

³You shall have no other gods before me.

The first commandment, according to the counting of most Protestant Christian traditions, consists of seven Hebrew words. English translations of Exodus 20:3 typically consist of about eight words, “You shall have no other gods before me” (NRSV). Jewish tradition combines verses 3 and 4 to form the second commandment. The first commandment in Jewish tradition is verse 2, “I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from a house of servitude.”

One effect of the common Christian formulation of the Ten Commandments is that the first word in the Hebrew word order of the text is “not.” The first commandment for most Protestant Christians is an entirely negative command. Commandments two through three and six through ten then follow this negative pattern and complete the list in negative fashion.

What does it mean for this most influential law collection to be so thoroughly negative?

The Hebrew text of Exodus 20:3 presents two intriguing problems. The first has to do with the translation of the final two words. The text literally says, “There shall not be for you other gods upon my faces.”

While the use of the Hebrew word for *face* in an idiom that means “before” or “in the presence of” is common, the preposition that is combined with it in this verse is not typically used in this idiom. This particular preposition, *`al*, which can mean “upon,” “about,” or “concerning,” is used in a remarkable collection of theologically ambiguous contexts.

In Genesis 1:2 “the spirit of God brooded *`al* the face of the waters.” In Job 42:6, Job “relents *`al* dust and ashes.” In Jonah 4:11 God asks, “Should I not be troubled *`al* Ninevah?”

This Hebrew preposition appears 5772 times in the Hebrew scriptures with almost as many shades of meaning. Interpreters should resist a strong sense of certainty about its role in any particular sentence. The commandment assumes there are alternatives to Yahweh, and that how these alternatives are placed in relation to Yahweh is the first issue a life of faith must confront.

The second difficulty involves punctuation. The end of every verse in the Hebrew Bible is marked with a symbol composed of two diamond shapes oriented vertically like the dots of a colon. This punctuation mark, called *soph passuq*, is mysteriously missing from the end of Exodus 20:3 in some manuscripts, including our oldest copy of the Hebrew Bible, the Leningrad Codex. The missing punctuation is

often understood to be a copying error, but this is difficult to imagine. This punctuation mark is also missing from the ends of vv. 4, 8, 9, and 10 of Exodus 20. The idea that a professional scribe would inadvertently omit this large obtrusive symbol from the text five times in close proximity seems very unlikely.

In terms of the whole list of commandments, this more likely indicates that some of those responsible for preserving the Hebrew scriptures did not think about divisions between “verses” in this part of the text in the same way as in other parts. More specifically for verse 3, they may not have wanted to separate it from verse 4 in the same way that other biblical verses are separated. More evidence of a technical nature indicates that the development and delineation of the items in this famous list of ten was a complicated process.

For example, a note in the margins of some manuscripts indicates that the four short commandments in verses 13-16 may have once been understood as a single verse. Perhaps it is ironic in light of all this complexity that the basic reason these commandments became ten is probably so simple. Ten commandments can be memorized and recited with the aid of ten human fingers. Yet this simple idea profoundly connects this text to the very structure of our bodies.

Honor, Not Shame

We do not know as much about ancient Israelite religion as some historians have often claimed that we do. We know enough, however, to say that monotheistic faith was a strange and difficult idea for these people. Exodus 20:3 at least warned them not to engage in the obvious religious rituals of the other people around them.

The easiest way to understand this command in its common English formulation is that “before me” means other things or ideas should not be afforded more importance than loyalty to God.

A quite different aspect emerges from the Hebrew language of this text. Other gods were not to be brought into God’s presence. With the help of readers from Africa and the Middle East whose cultures more closely resemble that of ancient Israel, biblical scholarship has begun to pay more attention to the concepts of honor and shame, which govern the patron-client relationships like those between a group of people and a deity in the ancient Near East.

The framework these ideas of honor and shame provide sheds light on the relationship between verse 2 and verse 3. Yahweh had acted faithfully as Israel’s patron, delivering them from the shame of slavery in Egypt. Israel now owed the same kind of honor and faithfulness to Yahweh. To bring other gods into the midst of that relationship would create the kind of shame that could result in the breakdown of this new relationship.

Identifying Idolatry Today

I am regularly surprised by the lack of sympathy most readers of the Old Testament extend to the ancient Israelites. In some ways these readers are following the lead of the text. The Israelites are portrayed as complainers in Exodus 16 when they bring up the problem of hunger in the wilderness. A typical response is, “How could they have been so unfaithful after all God had done to bring them out of Egypt?”

The assumption behind such a statement is that the actions of God were plainly visible and easy to understand for

ancient peoples. What if we imagine, instead, that their world was every bit as ambiguous as our own?

The Israelites in the wilderness were threatened with death from lack of food and water. Their children were starving. What would they have eaten if they had not complained? How long might God have waited to provide food if they had not complained?

In similar fashion, the tendency of the Israelites to worship other gods seems puzzling to modern readers. Again, the assumptions behind this puzzlement are that the right God is easy to distinguish from a wrong one, and the right way to worship God is obvious. What if the Israelites, once they were settled in Canaan, were just ordinary folks trying to make a life and provide for their families? For them this meant growing enough food each year to survive until the next. In the midst of such a struggle, how do people separate idolatrous elements from the standard agricultural techniques practiced in the culture around them?

Religion is not a self-contained component of culture. It is part of a complex web that forms a society. Modern life poses similar challenges of distinguishing idolatry in the midst of our own cultural matrix.

Businesses often use religious symbols and phrases to market their goods and services. Is this a proclamation of faith or manipulative marketing?

Political candidates use their spirituality as part of their campaign strategies. Is this an honest expression of their identity about which we should know or an obligatory nod toward the dominant religious tradition of our nation?

Religious institutions seek government funds to support their programs. Is this a wise allocation of resources, or are we bringing another god into our own temples?

In one of the great ironies of our times, a judge in Alabama actually had an image of these Ten Commandments made and placed in a public location.

It is difficult to say which of these actions is right or wrong, or if they are either right or wrong all the time. Practicing one's faith in the ancient world or the modern world is a challenging task. How can seven Hebrew words or eight English ones safeguard us from idolatry?

The answer, of course, is that they cannot. Much of the legal material that follows the Ten Commandments is classified as "casuistic" or "case" law. It contains answers to questions that arose as Israel attempted to apply the law. We may not like these answers, and the Christian tradition has chosen to reject most of them, but the impulse to interrogate the basic commandments provides us with a path to follow.

What does it mean to have other gods before our God?

Written by Mark McEntire, associate professor, School of Religion, Belmont University, Nashville, Tenn.

No Idols

Exodus 20:4-6

Theme: God demands complete distinction from any other.

Introduction

Idols. Graven images. Words that seem to belong to another time and place, or a Cecil De Mille epic.

Beyond Hollywood's frivolous attempts to create contemporary entertainment stars, what concept does the word *idol* conjure up for you? Statues of wood, stone or metal that, as objects of worship, belong to the distance past? Ornately decorated statues of Christian saints in Baroque cathedrals? Beautifully fashioned wall-hangings or banners hanging in a contemporary church?

The second commandment of the Decalogue is one of the more ambiguous. While people raised in the Judaeo-Christian tradition have broken all ten laws with regular impunity, the second has often created the most confusion, and the most bizarre responses. Compared to the straightforward simplicity of "you shall not steal," the injunction "you shall not make an idol" has been alternately ignored as irrelevant to current practices or ferociously debated and applied.

Throughout Christian history, religious purists have interpreted this commandment with fierce intensity. The last great wave of iconoclasm (the destruction of sacred religious images) occurred during the European Protestant

Reformation in the sixteenth century. Both in England and on the continent, some reformers bent on purifying the church of "idolatry" went on rapacious campaigns to eliminate any "graven images" they could find. Sculptures were smashed, paintings were burned, frescoes were white-washed and liturgical vessels were melted down.

In some countries the demolition was wholesale and indiscriminate. Some Protestant leaders, such as Zwingli, denounced Christian art within the church as a snare of the devil and outlawed religious painting and sculpture altogether. Any visual representation, even stained glass, was seen to be a distraction from true worship—all was to be light and white.

Such views extended to auditory worship elements as well. In Calvinist countries, reformed churches frowned on or abolished organs since they filled the church with "non-scriptural sound." One poignant story tells of an organist in Zurich who wept as he watched the axes smashing his great organ. Fortunately for us, Bach was a Lutheran instead of a Calvinist!

The sixteenth century left a lasting legacy on Protestant worship and attitude. Although the hatred of art softened over the centuries, a general suspicion or lack of appreciation for beauty, imagination and aesthetics has lingered.

Yet God has created humans as sentient beings. We experience life, express ourselves and respond through our various senses—one of the most prominent being visual. How do we employ these God-given senses in our most profound relationship—that with our Creator—in worship?

How should we understand the second commandment for our day?

The Biblical Witness

The second and third commandments are closely linked with the first and focus on the nature of one's undivided loyalty and response to Yahweh, the one true God. The second commandment's extended wording and detailed consequences might lead one to wonder if it has proved more difficult than the others to follow.

Imbedded in this one commandment are three prohibitions: you shall not make; you shall not worship; you shall not serve; and attendant consequences: chastisement or blessing.

Exodus 20:4 **Do not make...idols**

⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

Our first task is to understand the term translated in the NRSV as "idol," or in the familiar King James Version, as "graven image." The Hebrew word *pesel* means a carved or shaped image, made for use in the worship of deity.

The question arises as to whose image is being forbidden, God's or those of gods rival to God? Because of the close connection between the first and second commandments, it seems probable that the prohibition is against anyone adopting for their own personal use a shaped image for their worship of God; that is, if one keeps the first commandment to worship only Yahweh, then the second commandment only makes sense if understood as framing the nature of that worship.

The prohibition, then, is not against turning to other, competing gods but rather against the temptation to limit God to a visible, controlled image or place. Nothing in the whole created order—in the heavens, in the earth or sea—can serve to represent the God who created all things and all beings.

When Moses demanded a personal identification of the divine presence he encountered at the burning bush, God responded enigmatically, "I AM WHO I AM." Moses was commanded to tell the Israelites that "I AM," the God of their ancestors, had sent him to deliver them from slavery. The name actually gave Moses little specific information about God other than that God was the Creator. The delivery clearly indicated that God was under no obligation to define Godself to human creatures.

In the commandments that God mediates to the Israelites through God's servant Moses, this identification is once again spelled out. God will not be narrowly defined in human terms; God is who God is, and no images that are carved (graven) by human hands may confine the eternal and divine nature to an exclusive, domestic location. The people are strictly forbidden to attempt to fashion God into who or how they would like God to be.

Exodus 20:5a **Do not worship or serve...idols**

^{5a}You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God,

The second part of the second commandment warns God's people against worshipping or serving images crafted by human hands. Commentator John Durham translates this portion as "You are not to prostrate yourself to them, or be enticed to serve them."

Yahweh is self-described as a “jealous God.” This sounds strange to modern ears that understand jealousy as a petty, selfish trait. Rather, we should understand that Yahweh’s jealousy is a part of Yahweh’s holiness and is demanded by what God is. In Hebrew scripture, the term is always used in contexts where the loyalty of Yahweh’s people is in question—in apposition to other gods.

God’s people, then, are called to worship and serve the One God whose character is one of boundless and awe-full freedom. For finite beings this becomes a constant challenge, as the very frame of our worship and service so often creates boundaries around God. But God must be and is free to move and work without constraint even in the most pious worship and fervent service we offer. To make either ends in themselves verges on idolatry.

Jesus addressed this issue when a Samaritan woman he encountered at a village well asked him where God should be worshipped. “Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you [Jews] say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (Jn 4:20-24).

Both Samaritans and Jews had attempted to restrict God to a particular place—in effect, creating an idol of their worship.

The aim of worship and service must be God and only God.

Exodus 20:5b-6 **The Consequences**

^{5b}punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

God’s response to disobedience in fulfilling this commandment may sound over-the-top to our ears but is actually couched in covenantal language. Those who do not honor the holiness of God will be chastised, and those who love and obey God will be blessed.

In effect, this passage provides an insight into both the nature of God and the reality of communal life. A direction or pattern for life is usually set in families or community—a direction that often extends through generations and can permeate the society. In this sense, God’s statement is as much descriptive as prescriptive. We are not totally independent creatures; what we do and say does have an influence on others, for good or for ill. The attitude or behavior we model may outlive us by many generations.

John Durham’s translation conveys this understanding, in God’s declaration of being “one who will keep in mind the fathers’ guilt against the sons of the third and the fourth generations of those who hate me, yet one who will act with unchanging love towards the thousands [an innumerable descendancy] who love me, and who keep my commands.”

The unending faithfulness of God’s character is emphatically disclosed here: those who love and obey God will be the recipients of God’s boundless love for generations to come.

Honoring God's Distinction Today

Are we still creating idols?

Perhaps we create our idols with words. We tend to disregard the power of words to create visual images. How often have you heard (or used) the expression “the old man upstairs,” to refer to God? How does exclusive use of the male pronoun to refer to God, or the exclusive use of masculine images of God to the neglect of the feminine biblical images, confine God to a human-made image?

Is it possible that in many, indiscernible ways we have shaped images of God to worship—images that reduce God to comfortable and manageable portions—but that reduce the very *godness* of God that was not even revealed to Moses?

Consider the ubiquitous presence of Sallman's *Head of Christ* that is found in so many church fellowship halls and Sunday school rooms. This painting has been reproduced over 500 million times, making it one of the most popular art works of all time. The wide-spread use of this painting led David Morgan, an art historian, to study the phenomenon; he published a book about the effects this painting has had upon an entire generation of Christians around the world. As one woman stated, the picture appeals to her simply because it shows “just what Jesus looked like.”

How has western Christianity's propensity to represent one person of the Trinity in their own image as blond-haired and blue-eyed, fashioned an idol that has blinded many to his radical inclusiveness and created barriers against other people-groups?

Is the answer to return to whitewashed and unadorned walls—to have no distractions and no contradictions? I don't believe so. Since the beginning of time, human beings have sought to express their experience of the holy in ways that engage the senses with which the Creator endowed them. We worship best when we worship with our whole being, not only with our mind.

That said, God recognized the human tendency to stumble over this commandment. Again and again, people were reminded through the prophets, and later through the Son, that they were to worship in spirit and in truth. In other words, it is the attitude of the heart that counts.

We need constantly to keep in mind what the object of our heart's worship is. God, who cannot be defined or confined by any human agency, requires—no, demands—our unqualified worship and adoration. If we use visual or oral images to teach, communicate and lead worshippers into fuller appreciation of the manifold qualities of God, God will surely not be displeased.

In writing a book to help us celebrate Jewish feasts, Martha Zimmerman recalls Hebrew tradition which eloquently describes a symbol as something we can see so that our eye can remind our heart. As we beautify our sanctuaries and homes with visual reminders of God's majesty and goodness, may they be symbols that remind our hearts, instead of idols that separate us from the radical nature of God who will always remain beyond our full comprehension.

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Misusing God's Name

Exodus 20:7

Theme: Invoking the name of God for any purpose outside the nature and character of God is wrong.

Introduction

He called it “The Philosophy of John,” named after himself. It was the simplest prescription for personal success I have ever heard.

“Pastor, if you will decide what you want, determine that everything else is secondary and set it aside, and dedicate yourself to that one thing, you will get it.”

The pastoral question was obvious: “John, where does God, or even prayer, fit into this formula?” John had convinced himself: “It’s the perfect formula. God will surely bless it.”

If John decided to take someone else’s wife (which he eventually did), or to take over someone’s bank (he settled for a savings and loan), and if he prayed honest prayers, he at least had an interesting prayer life. Imagine: “Dear God, I want her!”

John led me to believe that he decided what he wanted, called on the name of the Lord to endorse his plan and went after it. He lived by a modern example of ancient oath-binding. Bring what you desire before the “powers that be”

and bind the gods through oath-prayer and ritual. Yes sir, any god worth the name would have to bless that.

John got a probated sentence on the savings and loan matter through the skillful maneuvers of a Dallas lawyer, but I wonder if he has reckoned with God about Exodus 20:7b.

John’s formula presents two huge problems. The first is that so many people of faith presume to use some form of it. The second and greater problem is that the God of Israel and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ will not be used.

The third commandment speaks to all flippant and empty misuse of God’s name. Whether it is casual profanity, flippant god-talk, or unbridled will to power or possession, God will not be obligated. Moreover, God will hold accountable anyone who so misuses the name.

The Biblical Witness

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

The third commandment is set in the context of commandments one and two, which declare that Israel’s God will not be mixed up or confused with any other so-called gods or images that are objects of reverence or worship.

This commandment emerges from something deep within the uniqueness of ancient Israel’s faith. There was something much more significant about that name than any other deity’s name God’s people had heard about or used. And Yahweh in this prohibition serves notice that God’s name will not be misused, manipulated or bound to anything to which God, by divine nature, will not be linked.

Name Use

Name use in the ancient biblical world reached deep within the person or thing named. The meaning of an individual person's name was far more than identification of the person, father's house, clan, or tribe—all essential to any meaningful identity in the ancient world. The name contained something of the nature and character of the person or thing named.

So when the name of a god was taken up or used, it was with the awareness that the nature and powers of those so-called gods were being invoked and even obligated to display. Ancient Near Eastern peoples in all cultures considered themselves to have a wealth of gods, with a variety of magical powers and cosmological force. Whether it was their seasonal agricultural cycles into which they called down the powers, or occasional episodes of war to which they bound their gods, the name, along with ritual accompaniment, were the keys to calling down the powers of the gods.

The religious sensitivity of the ancient god-diviners led them to look for patterns, whims, likes and dislikes of the gods. The timing and use of names and rituals were called upon depending upon which god did what and when. Blessings, curses, incantations and oaths would reach for the name of the god needed for the moment and the desired effect. You can imagine that random use of names might develop in times of desperation or great need, or even on a whim or at the will of those in power. The names could, and did, become subject to superstitious use.

Into such a world and such thinking the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob emerged, with a new way of acting and with a new name. God came forth with a new action, bringing the Israelites out of Egypt and out of bondage. Yahweh

was the one and only God of their history and their lives. And Yahweh had a name, representing divine nature and character, not to be mixed up or confused with any other. God was intolerant of any confusion with other so-called gods and any presumption of their powers or ways. This God was Yahweh and would not have the name invoked in an empty or meaningless way. This God was unlike the other so-called gods (which ancient Israel would eventually see were no gods—Isa 37:19; Jer 16:20).

The name of Yahweh, as representative of divine nature and character, was unique. He was jealous for his people and their faith in the best sense of the word. His way of acting on their behalf and relating to them was very personal. His way of working in the world must not be confused with prior practices.

Vain Use

The prohibition in this third commandment concerning the wrongful use of God's name has been heeded, at times very seriously. Rabbinic instruction within Judaism would eventually lead to the practice of substituting the more generic name for lord, *adonai*, at every place the name Yahweh appears in the Old Testament and in prayers. This practice continues in Orthodox and Conservative Judaism, and even in the reverential use of such texts and prayers in many Reformed Jewish synagogues.

The common interpretation that this verse denounces the use of profanity is certainly consistent with the commandment. But to stop with this more modern interpretation ignores an extensive understanding of the strong injunction against wrongful use or misuse of the name.

The ancient practice of invoking was characteristically an attempt "to lift up" the name of a god in an oath. It was a

mechanism to set in motion magical powers, or cosmic force of a god. To Yahweh these gods were vain, empty and meaningless, and such use of a divine name was vain and meaningless. Yahweh would have nothing to do with these common practices. It was empty magic. It was a meaningless call for cosmic force. It was superstition.

It was worse. Such practices could attempt to link Yahweh to the abuses of those wielding political, social and military power. Yahweh had dealt with such abuse of power by the presumed god-like Pharaoh, who had ordered the manipulation of magic and natural forces to sustain his control. Yahweh would not be so used, and many in power in ancient Israel and Judah would not get it. The tendency seems strong for those in power to so lift up the names of gods

In this prohibition Yahweh is removed from selfish whim and human will, and such practices are removed from the faith of God's people. Yahweh will not be used, period. The name must not be lifted up for any cause that is not consistent with God's nature and character. The name must not be called when magic is desired, or powers on earth would presume on a blessing.

Yahweh will not be manipulated. That seems to be at the heart of this prohibition. A warning is added to show the absolute degree of the command.

The Warning

The warning is simple. Those who misuse God's name will not be counted among the innocent. They will not be let off. For those who would make the name subject to their own will or whim, Yahweh will hold them accountable for the misuse.

Were it not for grace, all who have lifted up God's name in a willful, selfish and whimsical way would not be free from the guilt of such misuse. Because of the grace of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ we can be forgiven, and are in fact encouraged to call upon the name of the Lord.

Acceptable Use of the Name

Even in the early days of God's revelation the intent of God was to turn people to faith and trust in him. They were encouraged to lift up the name in faith, to "...call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples" (Ps 105:1). The intent of commandments of prohibition was to turn away from misuse and to turn to Yahweh, even calling upon the name in faith and for salvation. People of faith in God would learn that "...everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved;" (Joel 2:32; Rom 10:13).

Misuse and Faithful Use of God's Name Today

This commandment takes in all of the usual suspects: profanity, all paganizing, new age confusion of God's name and nature, and in fact any misuse that would lift up God's name without a conscious and sincere expression of faith. The commandment then gets proactive, taking in more suspects: whimsical chatter about God, flippant god-talk, even gossip disguised as prayer requests.

This could be serious, and it is. When faith becomes subject to an individual's will, when selfishness takes over most of our prayers, when our faith has tilted over the line with attempts to obligate God to our will, we are in the danger zone.

The commandment is actually quite meddlesome and intrusive. Wherever the name of God may be uttered, the

command is in force. How sobering. Consider: If the phrase “under God” is to be kept in the Pledge of Allegiance (this writer leans toward keeping it in), then persons of faith are obligated to hold the nation accountable to the one whose name has been invoked, and to divine character and nature and will. God is not obligated, the nation and its leaders are.

Now, the commandment can be problematic. This is a God who will not accommodate to unjust treatment of anyone. This is a God who will not be obligated to the willful abuse of power. If a policy or practice is not just, this God will not be obligated to bless. Even if a war is presumed just, God is not obligated simply because the name is lifted.

If people of faith want bigger and better homes, cars and even houses of worship, is God obligated to bless when the name is called? If the name is lifted while sensitivity and love are denied to anyone due to gender, race, ideology or other differences, is God obligated to show up on the side of the invoker?

Can the name be used to creedalize our own remaking of the nature of faith and practice? When the name is invoked to substantiate personal ministry without effective evangelism, or insensitive evangelizing without personal concern, is God obligated to bless?

The prohibition of the third commandment may be more needed now than ever before. Perhaps we should call on persons of faith to vacate all whim and arrogance in our creeds, ideologies, presumptions of innocence and assumptions of correctness on all fronts. We might then be prepared to humbly lift up “...*the name that is above every name*...” (Phil 2:9).

Written by Ronald L. Cook, associate professor, Truett Seminary, Waco, Texas.

Remember the Sabbath

Exodus 20:8-11

Theme: God commands that we achieve proper balance between work and rest.

Introduction

A running joke on the Tim Allen sitcom “Home Improvement” involved the main character’s affinity for tools. “More power!” was the watchword.

My great-grandfather was a carpenter. He built the house I grew up in, with rough-cut oak framing, when he was in his 70s. Yet he never owned a power tool.

His secret? At the end of each day, after supper, he would descend to the basement and sharpen his saws.

It’s an apt metaphor for our technology-driven age. In our “more power” approach to improving our lives, we often neglect the importance of “sharpening our saw.”

One way to do that is by recovering the Sabbath.

The practice of Sabbath-keeping has gotten a bad name. Jesus’ sparring with the religious leaders of his time over the meaning of the Sabbath prompt some to conclude that the Jewish tradition on the subject is nothing more than a bunch of silly rules. Christians in the United States didn’t do much better, presenting a list of “don’ts” that essentially reduced Sunday to a day when no fun is allowed.

At its best, however, Sabbath-keeping is a way to reconnect to the cycles of life. Sabbath practitioners testify that it powerfully affects their relationship to God, work, nature and one another. There is something about the Sabbath, one writer said, that reshapes the soul, reforms our lives and builds faith.

Sabbath, or Shabbat, is at the heart of Judaism. A saying goes, “more than the Jews have kept Shabbat; Shabbat has kept the Jews.” When asked by congregants how to get serious about their faith, the rabbis often answer, “Keep the Sabbath.”

It is also important in Christianity. The Puritans were fond of saying, “good Sabbaths make good Christians.”

Yet the practice for some has fallen into neglect. When the Southern Baptist Convention rewrote the Baptist Faith and Message in 2000 with stricter language on practices like women’s ordination and wifely submission, it inexplicably relaxed an article on the Lord’s Day.

The 1963 version of the faith statement said Sunday “should be employed in exercises of worship and spiritual devotion.” The 2000 version changed it to read that the day should “include” such exercises. It also removed a sentence about “refraining from worldly amusements, and resting from secular employment, works of necessity and mercy only being excepted.” In its place is a sentence advising that activities on Sundays should be “commensurate with the Christian’s conscience under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.”

Even the Calvinist/fundamentalist “Founders Journal” viewed the change as an “accommodation to culture” and a move “away from the historic Baptist position regarding the

Lord’s Day and toward the secularization of that day by American culture.”

The Biblical Witness

The fourth commandment presupposes a practice that was already known. The children of Israel were told to “remember” the Sabbath, not to institute it.

Exodus 16 describes obedience to the Sabbath before Moses received the Ten Commandments by commanding that manna be gathered daily except for the seventh day. The Israelites were told to gather twice as much as normal on the sixth day, so they could eat on the Sabbath. When they tried to hoard it on other days, it became filled with worms (Ex. 16:5).

It is unknown when Israel first began keeping the Sabbath, but Genesis presents it as a part of the creation. God rested on the seventh day, and Exodus calls on God’s followers to follow the example.

Deuteronomy repeats this commandment but uses a different reason. “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day” (Deut 5:15).

Deuteronomy also calls for allowing slaves to rest on the Sabbath, alluding to Israel’s past as a reminder that only free people are allowed to refrain from work.

Exodus 20:8-10 Holy: Wholly Separate

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

The noun *Sabbath* is most probably drawn from a Hebrew verb meaning “to rest” or “to cease from work.”

It is Israel’s most original contribution to the world’s law. While there were other days of rest in the ancient world, they were ordained by royal fiat. The Jewish Sabbath is the first to be proscribed as part of a religious ritual.

Judaism regards the Sabbath as the most important holiday of the Jewish calendar. It is the first holiday mentioned in the Bible, and God is the first to observe it. The biblical penalty for violating the Sabbath (death) is greater than for any other holiday. There is a tradition that the Messiah will come if every Jew observes the Sabbath twice in a row. The Talmud looks forward to the messianic age as “The day when all will be Sabbath.”

The Bible commands that God’s people consider the Sabbath “holy,” or wholly separate from the rest of the week.

The commandment also says that followers should “do no work” on the Sabbath. The Hebrew word does not relate exactly to the word *work*. It rather refers to 39 categories of activities the Talmud prohibits on the Sabbath. While some, like putting a pot of water on a stove to boil, don’t involve

much physical effort, the 39 categories all have one thing in common—they prohibit any activity that is creative or exercises control over the environment.

When God rested on the seventh day, it wasn’t because God was tired. Isaiah 40:28 says that God “does not faint or grow weary.” Rather God rested, in the biblical sense, when God ceased to create and to interfere in the world.

The Sabbath is one day when the world can do without our labors. It is also the only “*mitzvah*” (good work) that can be kept passively, by not doing any work, and hence in Jewish thought is the only one that can be done perfectly.

The Midrash answer an apparent contradiction between God resting on the Sabbath and God finishing the creation on the seventh day in Genesis 2:2 with a profound answer. If God did nothing on the Sabbath, creation was finished on the sixth day. On the Sabbath, the rabbis suggested, God created rest.

Sabbath from the Margins

In his book *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, Miguel De La Torre shares Justo Gonzalez’ story of a sermon preached on the Fourth Commandment at a church of very poor parishioners. The minister began by asking how many in the congregation worked six days the last week. What about five days?, he asked. Four days? And so on. Few were able to raise their hands, so the minister asked how many wanted to work six days but could not find employment. Nearly every hand went up.

The minister responded: “How, then, are we to obey the law of God that commands that we shall work six days, when we cannot even find work for a single day?”

De La Torre observes that dominant cultures tend to read the Bible in ways that keep social structures in place that benefit the privileged ones. While few people admit to being racist, for example, white Americans continue to benefit from social structures that give them an advantage over minorities.

The Southern Baptist Convention formed in 1845 over slavery. A century and a half later the denomination apologized for past racism. Black Americans continue to lag behind in numerous indicators of quality of life, however. As Israel was told to remember its ancestors were once slaves, perhaps affluent Baptists would do well to remember that their ancestors were once slave holders.

Lord of the Sabbath

The New Testament presents the Sabbath as a major point of contention between Jesus and the religious establishment of his day. Jesus never rejects the Sabbath, however, but only decries a slavish devotion to regulations at the expense of human need. By declaring the Son of Man “Lord of the Sabbath,” Jesus said that he had authority to interpret it correctly.

The Bible suggests the first Christians continued to observe the Sabbath, adding worship on Sunday as a way to commemorate Christ’s resurrection. Paul included it in a list of practices that were not obligatory for Gentile Christians (Col 2:16).

Over time, Christianity became more Gentile and less Jewish. After Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Judaism became more identified with a strict interpretation of the Law. As a result, Sunday, for most Christians, became the one day of the week for both rest

and worship. The emperor Constantine declared Sunday as a day of rest in 321.

Recovering the Biblical Sabbath

What is behind the trend toward “secularization” of the Lord’s Day as evidenced by the revised Baptist Faith and Message?

One factor is commerce. The nation’s largest Christian bookstore chain, Family Christian Stores, now opens its stores on Sunday afternoon, rationalizing that the Great Commission applies 24/7. “Churches have their doors open on Sunday, why shouldn’t we?” said the chain’s president.

The second-largest Christian retailer, LifeWay Christian Resources, said it has no plans to follow suit and open its chain on Sundays. Even orders placed on Sunday through LifeWay’s Web site aren’t processed until Monday, according to a company official. “We see Sunday as an important day for our employees to spend in church and with their families,” said Bruce Munns, director of retail store operations.

Time will tell if market pressures will force other Christian retailers to take similar steps, however. Christian retailing has grown into a \$4.2 billion a year industry. With increasing percentages of women working during the normal business week, Monday-Friday hours are increasingly unviable as shopping time.

Meanwhile, some voices in the Christian community are urging recovery of the biblical notion of Sabbath. Tilden Edwards, an Episcopal priest, suggests not a renewed Sabbatarianism but rather a pattern of “Sabbath time.”

Educator and author Dorothy Bass identifies what is “not good” on the Christian Sabbath as including work and commerce and worry. “To act as if the world cannot get along without our work for one day in seven is a startling display of pride that denies the sufficiency of our generous maker,” she writes in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*.

What is “good,” Bass continues, are “joyful worship,” followed by time with loved ones, solitude, sleep, reading, reflection, walking and prayer.

Bass also warns churches not to “devour” the Sabbath by filling the day with committee meetings and other religious obligations.

“Overworked Americans need rest, and they need to be reminded that they do not cause the grain to grow and their greatest fulfillment does not come through the acquisition of material things,” Bass says.

Harvard Divinity School professor Stephanie Paulsell, a minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), says that ministers are among the worst offenders when it comes to breaking the Sabbath, because everyone else’s day off is their busiest day, and their work is never done. She challenges churches to step in when ministers become overworked.

“I think there are too few congregations who will come to the pastor and say you need to take a day off,” Paulsell says. “Two days off; I think that’s the model, so you have a day you can catch up to do your laundry and mow the lawn, and so you have a day for spiritual renewal.”

When we achieve a balance between rest and work, we find deeper meaning in both. Reclaiming and practicing the biblical Sabbath allows us to achieve that balance.

Remember the Sabbath.

Written by Bob Allen, managing editor, EthicsDaily.com, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Honoring Parents

Exodus 20:12

Theme: Showing honor to parents connects us to those who have lived before us and who gave us life.

Introduction

The rules posted at a swimming pool state: “No horseplay. No glass containers. No diving....”

Think about what these simple rules tell us. Children wrestled around the edges of the pool and someone was hurt. A glass bottle fell from a poolside table and the broken glass cut the foot of a barefoot swimmer. Someone dived into the shallow end of the pool, resulting in a serious injury.

In order to protect other swimmers, rules were established to prevent these problems from occurring again. Consequently, no horseplay is allowed on the pool’s concrete apron. Glass objects are forbidden inside the fence. Swimmers cannot dive into the water.

Rules tell us what the problems have been and are an attempt to prevent problems from happening again.

Each of the Ten Commandments describes a potential moral problem that men and women encounter in their relationships with God or with their neighbors. When we read, “You shall have no other gods before me,” we remember that we often yield to the temptation to love things that are unworthy of our highest affections. The command to

rest on the Sabbath reminds us that men and women were workaholics long before the term was coined.

If we think about the commandments as lenses through which we examine the potential problems in our most important relationships, none of us is surprised to find prohibitions against lying, stealing, murder or adultery on the list. These problems are obvious; we have seen the damage done by individuals who break these commandments.

But when we stop to think about the commandments as a way to determine a list of moral problems, we may be surprised to find the commandment to honor our fathers and mothers. If we brainstormed a list of the all the commandments designed to help us avoid the ten most serious moral problems, who would think to include “Honor your father and mother...”? Yet when we examine the list of commandments God gave to the children of Israel at Mount Sinai, we find it as number five.

Perhaps the fifth commandment deserves more attention than we normally give to it. Perhaps it reveals a more serious dilemma than we first thought.

The Biblical Witness

The fifth commandment is the first that speaks about our relationships with other members of the human family. The previous four commandments in the Decalogue have been about our relationship to God. Thus, the command to honor father and mother marks an important juncture in the list of commandments. The same God who requires a level of devotion necessary for keeping the first four commandments also requires members of the family of faith to treat each other in a particular way.

Exodus 20:12

Much More Than Obedience

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

Learning how to treat each other begins with learning to honor the people to whom we owe our existence in the flesh. We often like to teach this commandment to our dependent children, yet God originally delivered it to adults—individuals who were the adult children of mothers and fathers.

By placing our obligation to mothers and fathers as the first commandment related to the human community, the Decalogue reminds us that life is a gift. Our parents are visible reminders that we were created. None of us is “self-made.” Dependent children know this fact; adult children often forget it.

The commandment begins with the imperative “honor,” and is one of only two commandments expressed positively. But what does the word “honor” actually mean?

When we teach this commandment to younger children, we often reduce the word simply to mean “obey.” The Hebrew word used here is broader and deeper than obedience and comes from a root that means “heavy,” as in giving weight or precedence to someone. Other shades of meaning for this word include to esteem, to respect or to prize highly.

In other places in Hebrew scripture where the word is used, it implies affection, too (Ps 91:15). Therefore, to honor parents connotes respect, affection, caring and esteem. Understanding that the word used here is different from “to obey” eliminates needless discussions on what individuals should do if they disagree with their parents.

It is possible for us to choose a course of action that conflicts with our parents’ desires yet still show them honor. “To honor” in the biblical sense allows for respectful disagreement. It does not, however, allow for a cynical or caustic rebuff.

While this commandment may have less to do with disagreement and more to do with disrespect, we should not ignore the serious penalties associated with the blatant disrespect for parents. In the next chapter of Exodus, the law prescribes death as the penalty for cursing parents (Ex 21:17).

The honor we are commanded to give is due both to father and mother. Bible students often point out that Moses and the Israelites lived in a male-dominated world. Women had few of the rights and even fewer of the privileges granted to men. Yet here, we are instructed to honor both parents equally. In Leviticus 19:3, a restatement of this commandment even puts mothers ahead of fathers in the command to honor. There is no favoritism here, no elevation of one parent over the other based upon gender.

Understanding the Promise

The conclusion of this commandment is unique in the Decalogue: it contains a promise. How are we to understand the promise of long life in the land? Neither this commandment nor any of the laws given to Moses are absolute guarantees of a long or good life. If, however, the commandments are rules designed by God to help us prevent problems that may arise from poor moral choices, keeping God’s laws puts us on a path where we can avoid many of those problems.

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon tell us: “Something about us would rather ascribe our lives to fate, good or bad luck, rather than obedient or disobedient conduct. We wonder ‘why bad things happen to good people’ rather than be filled with wonderment for how, even in this disordered world, good things really do often happen to good people.”¹

Keeping this commandment, or any commandment, helps us to align our lives with the will and intent of God for our lives. Surely good things often come from aligning our lives with God’s intentions. Looking at this same principle from a negative angle, the book of Proverbs contains two statements that anticipate destruction for the person who violates God’s intention by showing disrespect toward mother or father (Prov 20:20, 30:17).

Same Commandment, Enlarged Meanings

When the rich, young ruler asked him what he must do to obtain eternal life, Jesus referred to this commandment (see Matt 19:19; Mk 10:19; Lk 18:20). Jesus’ initial response to his question included all five of the Ten Commandments that address our relationships with other people. Jesus also added the command to love our neighbors as we do ourselves.

By including this commandment in his response, Jesus reinforced the fact that honoring father and mother is an ethical equivalent to abstaining from murder, adultery, stealing or bearing false witness. Jesus went a step further in reinforcing the importance of this commandment in one of his last statements from the cross. In John 19:26-27, Jesus honored Mary by making sure “the disciple whom Jesus loved” would care for her.

Paul also made an important addition to the Christian understanding of family relationships by adding the principle of reciprocity: in every relationship, both parties owe something to the other (see Eph 5:21-6:3). The teaching begins in 5:21 with the statement “Submit to one another...” This verse then applies to each of the three family relationships that follow: husband and wife; parent and child; master and slave. (In this instance, Paul considered slaves as part of the family.)

Paul reminds us that no Christian relationship is one-directional. Children ought to honor parents, but parents ought to live in a way worthy of their child’s honor. Parents cannot treat their children in an unchristian manner and then utilize the fifth commandment in order to demand their children’s respect.

Honoring Parents Today

The day came when Beth’s mother couldn’t manage alone anymore. Illness confined her to bed and required that someone stay with her all the time. Beth was an only child; her father had died two years before. There was no question what she had to do. Still, Beth had to fight hard not to resent the interruption in her life.

She’d only been on the road an hour when her 11-year-old daughter called, crying. John, Beth’s husband, hadn’t finished the laundry in time for her to wear what she had planned for school that day. Beth choked back the bitterness and drove on.

She arrived at her mother’s house just after lunch. A neighbor who had been staying with her mother said good-bye, leaving Beth and her mother alone. Walking into the bedroom, she smelled something. Her mother must have seen

her nostrils flare as she tried to locate the source of the smell. “It’s me, Darling. My diaper needs changing.”

Beth was shaken. Panic raced through her mind. “Oh, God, not this,” she thought to herself.

Her mother sensed it. Her calm words helped Beth focus. “It’s OK, honey. Now it’s your turn.” As if to give Beth permission, her mother grabbed her hand. “I wonder how many times I changed your diaper. Every time was a chance to tell you I love you. I remember I’d sing to you. I sang ‘Jesus Loves Me,’ hoping you’d grow up to know his love.”

Beth could not remember a day she didn’t believe in God or know about Christ. She had assumed that the knowledge of God was innate in every child. Now she wondered if the knowledge was instinct or a gift from the woman who had changed her diapers every day when she was an infant. Beth knew what she had to do, and she performed the task with as much tenderness and dignity as she could muster.

Six months later Beth’s mother passed away. At the service, the congregation sang “Jesus Loves Me.” Only Beth knew why. She didn’t know it was possible to have two such conflicting emotions at the same time: overpowering grief because of her mother’s death, along with intense thanksgiving for the six months that she had been able to give tender honor to the woman who had given her life.

Written by Joel Snider, pastor, First Baptist Church, Rome, Ga.

You Shall Not Murder

Exodus 20:13

Theme: Because human life belongs to God, we must respect it and work to enhance and protect it.

Introduction

At first glance, this seems a simple enough, straightforward commandment—a mere four words in English translations and only two in Hebrew.

“Don’t murder anyone,” God says.

“Hey, no problem,” I’m tempted to respond. “I haven’t murdered anyone, don’t plan to murder anyone, and, in fact, find it hard to imagine circumstances that would lead me to murder someone. So, check this one off the Big Ten list, and credit me with one commandment obeyed.”

But this commandment refuses to be so easily dismissed. Understood in its context of God’s relationship with the covenant community of the people of Israel and interpreted through the life and teachings of Jesus, the fifth commandment delivers a challenging message to the church today to live as a peaceable community of people who dare to follow the way of Jesus in a violent world.

We live on a planet plagued by a wanton disregard for human life—a world beset by war, violent crime, brutality, genocide and terrorism.

In the city where I live, the headlines paint a disturbing picture: a respected, church-going mother brutally kills her two young children; a young man and his girlfriend hire the murder of his parents in an upscale, middle-class neighborhood in an effort to pocket a hefty insurance settlement; a tenth-grader with a grudge shoots a classmate to death as he walks home from school; an elderly man in his eighties, distraught over his own declining health and the inability to care for his wife who is suffering from leukemia, walks into a nursing home and shoots his wife before turning the gun on himself.

At the airport, a trembling, white-haired grandmother valiantly tries to maintain her dignity as she stands, arms outstretched, while a uniformed official inspects her for potential weapons. A few feet away, parents headed for Disney World try to explain to their two young boys why they have to take their shoes off for inspection before walking through the security gate.

As if real violence were not enough, media violence—in television, movies, video games, even music—has become a staple in the American home. By the time the average child turns 18, he or she will have witnessed depictions of more than 200,000 acts of violence and 16,000 murders. Studies indicate that media violence in the past decade has not just increased in quantity; it has also become more graphic, more sexual and more sadistic.

Against this backdrop, we would do well to take a second look at the fifth commandment.

The Biblical Witness

Exodus 20:13

A Closer Look

You shall not murder.

Ironically, for such a terse, simple statement, the fifth commandment through the centuries has been the most vigorously debated of the ten. Is it better translated “do not murder” or “do not kill”? How specifically or how broadly is it to be applied? What about war, capital punishment, self-defense or unintentional killing? What about issues such as suicide, euthanasia and abortion?

Before long, we find ourselves focusing on exceptions rather than the rule and on justifications for our opinions rather than application to our lives. In our efforts to wriggle off the hook, we miss the commandment’s intent.

The fifth commandment can be translated “don’t murder” or “don’t kill.” In a majority of cases in Hebrew scripture, the Hebrew word “to kill” is used in the sense of “murder” (cf. 1 Kings 21:19). However, the same word can also refer to unintentional killing (Deut 4:41-42; 19:3, 4, 6; Num 35:6, 11, 12; Josh 20:3, 5, 6; 21:13, 21), as well as to the execution of a duly convicted killer (Num 35:30).

Further, Hebrew scripture includes multiple instances when the taking of human life is sometimes justified, including war (cf. Deut 20:1ff.) and capital punishment. In fact, capital punishment within the Jewish legal system was prescribed for a wide variety of both civil and religious offenses.

In addition to murder (Ex 21:12; Lev 24:17), the death penalty was applied to child sacrifice (Lev 20:2); manslaughter (Num 25:9-28); bearing false witness on a capital charge (Deut 19:18-21); kidnapping or stealing a man (Ex 21:16; Deut 24:7); keeping an ox that was known to be

dangerous (Ex 21:29); various forms of immorality, including incest (Lev 18:6-18: 20:14; Deut 27:20,23), unchastity (Deut 22:21-24), adultery and unnatural vice (Lev 18:23; 20:10-16; Ex 22:19; Ezek 16:38, 40; Jn 8:5), and fornication (Lev 21:9; Deut 22:22; Gen 38:24); various religious and ritual offenses such as witchcraft and magic (Ex 22:18; Lev 20:6, 27), idolatry (Ex 22:20; Deut 12:6-11), and blasphemy (Lev 24:10-16); false claims to be a prophet (Deut 13:5, 10); intrusion into a sacred place or office (Num 1:41; 3:10; 18:7); breaking the Sabbath (Ex 31:14); and insult or injury to one's parents (Ex 21:15,17; Lev 20:9; Deut 21:18-21).

The Bigger Picture

Minimally, then, the commandment eliminates all *wrongful* killing—murder that is premeditated or performed with malice. But the picture is still incomplete without consideration of the commandment's scope and intent within the larger canvas of God's redemptive purpose for, and relationship with, God's creation.

The Ten Commandments were not handed down from the heavens as a set of rules for humanity in general or as a kind of universal moral code for an ordered and civilized society. Rather, they were issued by a certain God—"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex 20:1-2)—to a particular people through whom God wished to bless and redeem all humankind (cf. Gen 12:1-3).

The commandments were a call to a way of life for God's covenant people. Thus, the fifth commandment's prohibition against murder, as well as the prescribed circumstances for the justifiable taking of human life, was more than an individual responsibility. It involved the individual

stewardship of God's gift of life, but it also recognized that life is a communal trust held by the community. To be a part of the covenant community was to be responsible for preserving and protecting life.

In the covenant following the flood, God established forever the value of human life: *Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind* (Gen 9:6). The reason human life must be preserved, respected and protected is that humanity was created in the image of God (Gen 1:27).

Regardless of the various allowances for the taking of another life, Hebrew scripture is clear that this prerogative *never* belongs to humanity or to human institutions but *exclusively* to God. To take a life is to usurp the authority that belongs solely to God. It is to rob God; indeed, it is in essence an attempt to take the place of God.

Furthermore, even in acknowledging certain allowances, it is important to keep in mind God's steadfast desire for *shalom*, an absolute peace and wholeness for both the individual and the community (cf. Isa 2:2ff; Mic 4:1ff.), and the vision for a time when all humanity would live free from violence and fear of harm (Mic 4:4).

The fifth commandment is also clearly intertwined with the other commandments. Adultery, stealing, lying and covetousness—even dishonoring one's parents—can lead to acts of violence, even murder. We all know of parents who have "gone to an early grave" at least in part because of the agony and broken-heartedness inflicted by their children.

Matthew 5:21-22 A Deeper Level

²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.”

However one may debate the intent of the fifth commandment, Jesus moved the issue to a deeper level, to a matter of the heart. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reinterpreted the commandment as part of his call to a new standard of “righteousness.”

Jesus expanded the scope of the commandment to encompass attitudes as well as actions, understanding that the fruit of violence is borne of emotional and spiritual seeds. He understood the connections between violent behavior and attitudes of anger, bitterness, hatred and revenge.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus reflected the God-given worth of human personality. He taught that consideration of the needs of others should be rooted in awareness that what we do to others we effectively do to him (Matt 25:31ff).

Jesus also practiced what he preached. He never resorted to killing, even in self-defense. He resisted the use of coercion or violence as a means to defend or establish his kingdom. In his teaching and his life, Jesus invited his followers to a new way of life.

Honoring Life Today

There are more ways to kill someone than literally to take physical life. Our capacity to harm others directly and indirectly through non-physical violence is sobering. We

can inflict pain and injury without lifting a hand. Anyone who has, for example, been the victim of gossip knows that it can maim without killing.

I know of a congregation that suffered greatly because of the pastor’s extramarital affair with a church member. In the years that followed, however, the church was harmed as much or more by the lingering bitterness and anger of a few members who were intent on hurting the former pastor. They undermined efforts toward reconciliation and went out of their way to try to destroy his reputation and any chances of serving another church. In the process, they nearly destroyed the spirit of their own church family.

Closer to home, I know of my own capacity to hurt others, even those whom I love the most. I wince with shame when I recall specific moments when thoughtless words and careless actions have wounded the spirit of my son or daughter or snatched the joy from my wife’s eyes.

Have you ever wished ill for another person? Have you lashed out in anger, wounding someone’s pride and self-esteem? Have you effectively destroyed a friendship or killed a relationship? To humiliate someone in public is an act of violence. Spouses do it to each other. Teachers do it to their students. Friends do it to friends. But it is not the way of Jesus.

We can also do harm more indirectly. When we are indifferent to conditions and policies that prevent the marginalized in our society from adequate health care, nutrition and housing, we are contributing to their diminished lives. Likewise, the greedy accumulation of wealth and the selfish hoarding of the earth’s limited resources are, in effect, acts of violence against the world’s poor and powerless.

Stated positively, the prohibition of the fifth commandment—“you shall not murder”—is an admonition to “treasure life.” As the people of God, we are called to treasure life, to respect and value life as a gift from God the Creator in whose image we are made. We are called to honor all of God’s children, living in ways that enhance, protect and nurture life.

In a dark and violent world, where life is cheapened in countless ways, we are called to live the peaceable way of Jesus.

Written by David Wilkinson, minister of education and discipleship, Broadway Baptist Church, Fort Worth, Texas.

You Shall Not Commit Adultery

Exodus 20:14

Theme: Fidelity in marriage engenders relationships of mutuality and respect that are life-giving and nurturing.

Introduction

In 1631, Barker and Lewis, the official printers for King James, published what became known as “The Wicked Bible.” It was a well-appointed, attractive leather volume befitting its content. There was only a small flaw.

“The Wicked Bible” was missing a single three-letter word. In this printing of the King James Bible, the seventh commandment read, “Thou shalt commit adultery.”

The outraged King fined the printers 300 pounds (approximately \$33.6 million in today’s world). This put them out of business.

In our culture, such a consequence is unimaginable. When sexual infidelity of all types is a mandatory fixture in almost every hit movie, this commandment on adultery seems dated and worn. When people in loveless marriages stray to find happiness, this command seems too restrictive and quaint.

While leaving the word “not” out of the seventh commandment would still be recognized as an error, our society recites the prohibition against adultery with a knowing wink and a nod.

The rest of the commandments receive a great deal more respect than the seventh, it seems. The commands about placing God in the right place, honoring parents, not engaging in behavior that destroys the social order all still seem somehow current and good advice in general.

The issue of adultery, however, seems to be slipping into the arcane. Our culture has developed a sexual openness, allowing for birth control that eliminates the most obvious consequence of infidelity, and easily obtained divorces and the movement of marriage from the realm of sacred covenant to that of civil/legal agreement.

An additional challenge churches face is their reluctance to have honest discussions about sexual ethics. It is awkward to speak and hear of such issues from the pulpit. Modesty and propriety often leave such discussions out of bounds in Sunday school classes and discussions. Rather than prayerful and deliberative attempts to seek God's direction, we make glancing blanket statements and condemnations.

Lacking the foundation for this command leaves it isolated in space and easily ignored as one of those things that is said at church but doesn't have any relevance to the realities of life.

The Biblical Witness

Defining Adultery Exodus 20:14

You shall not commit adultery.

The first observation we must make is that when the seventh commandment condemns adultery, it is not adultery as it is defined in our culture. In ancient Israel, the sin of

adultery was committed by the man against the husband of the woman involved. Women were viewed primarily as property; broaching the marriage covenant was an unlawful violation of property rights. Marital affairs involving unmarried women were not considered adultery.

Should the church promote such a narrow definition of adultery today? Listening to some people who champion a return to the Ten Commandments and the religious and social values they promote, it seems they would be forced to argue for the original meaning. Should Christians perpetuate the teaching of any command that makes women into property?

Even Jesus rejected a literal, limited reading of the commandment. In the Sermon on the Mount, he argues for expanding the definition of adultery beyond the narrow original view: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt 5:27-28).

In this much broader definition, no longer is adultery an act; it is also an intention. It still is a prohibition directed toward men, but it considerably expands the application.

It seems clear that in our culture, the Mosaic definition of adultery is inadequate. To recognize the full personhood of both males and females, adultery needs to be defined as a violation of the exclusive sacred covenant of marriage by either party. This can, as Jesus identified, be the result of an act of sexual infidelity, but it also can be a sin of the heart.

I suspect that Jesus would include any form of improper intimacy in the definition as well. A marriage can be just as

easily destroyed by morning cups of coffee where inappropriate closeness is shared as by a sexual act. A trusted confidant can slip across the boundaries of friendship and into the realm of the deepest and most personal intimacies that ought to only be shared by a spouse. Internet chats with a partner outside the marriage covenant is yet another form of betrayal of trust.

Any relationship that replaces the marital one as the primary place where value, affection and sharing take place is an adultery. The English word *adultery* has the same root as the word *adulterate*, which means to corrupt by adding something from outside. Though not the Hebrew notion of the term, this range of meaning strikes clearly to Jesus' expanded definition and pictures clearly the intrusion in a marriage by a third party.

Costly Consequences

Another issue that surrounds the commandment is the question of consequence. The Ten Commandments lack any prescribed punishment. It is in other parts of the law found in scripture that an explicit description of the legal consequence of adultery is found, such as Leviticus 20:10: "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death."

The unfortunate truth is that an expanded definition of adultery applied to this legal standard would leave us with an under-populated or perhaps even unpopulated planet.

Our society looks with horror at conservative Muslim states that put adulterous women to death. Even advocates of the death penalty do not argue for its application to adulterers. So what ought to be the consequence of breaking the seventh commandment? The removal of punishments and

the prospect of criminal litigation suggest that our society no longer views adultery as a danger to the social order.

Of course, the argument can be made in a relatively convincing fashion that the prohibition against adultery serves a social purpose. It is the only one of the commandments that deals with a question of sexual activity. Tellingly, other forms of sexual behavior are not addressed here. While other types of sexual expression may be wrong, this one is singled out because it destabilizes society. It has the potential to create children without a clear place in the family structure. It encourages the devaluation of marriage as a social institution and encourages the proliferation of divorce and its complications.

However, it strikes me that basing arguments in favor of the prohibition against adultery in order to promote the value of marital fidelity to society are fundamentally misplaced. In actuality, society is not at issue. The Decalogue is not a social contract, but is a religious document. To transgress is not to fail society, but to fail one's partner and more importantly to fail God.

We have mistakenly assumed that the legally sanctioned, IRS-favored social institution is the same as marriage. The state does not sanctify a marriage; it is God's blessing. While it may involve a social contract, marriage in the true sense is a spiritual union entered into by the two parties, with God as the witness.

If this is the case, adultery is breaking a promise made before God and is of more danger to a person's spiritual well-being than it is a threat to the foundation of society. To commit adultery is a form of lying to God and as such, injures not just the partner but also the adulterer's relationship with the Divine Creator.

Marriage: A Holy Estate

The 2003 movie “Lost In Translation” garnered an academy award nomination for Bill Murray. This rather dark film focuses on the relationship that develops between two Americans dislocated together in Tokyo.

Bob Harris is a movie star with a wife who does not understand him. Charlotte has a husband who is so self-involved he hardly notices that she exists. With no one to turn to, their respective marriages on the skids, the two find friendship and intimacy in each others arms.

Surprisingly for a Hollywood production, the two never share a sexual fling. Just as the movie seems to build to that point, the Murray character has a one-night stand with a bar singer. The relationship between Bob and Charlotte deteriorates as she finds the woman in his room.

The movie does not suggest that there should be any sympathy for Bob and Charlotte’s current spouses. Scenes are cut and lines spoken in such a way as to suggest that this impending affair is the best thing for these two miserable people trapped by their lives half a world away from home. But the moment that is created to generate emotional sympathy is Bob’s betrayal of Charlotte. It is ironic that the audience is asked to feel the sadness for the unconsummated affair, interrupted by another affair.

In his review of the movie, Chicago *Sun-Times* columnist Roger Ebert wrote, “These conversations can really only be held with strangers. We all need to talk about metaphysics, but those who know us well want details and specifics; strangers allow us to operate more vaguely on a cosmic scale. When the talk occurs between two people who could plausibly have sex together, it gathers a special charge: you

can only say ‘I feel like I’ve known you for years’ to someone you have not known for years. Funny, how your spouse doesn’t understand the bittersweet transience of life as well as a stranger encountered in a hotel bar.

Ebert unwittingly touches the heart of the matter. We want to have community without the cost of knowing each other. We want to objectify others and use them, not to know them and love them, but to meet our own needs. We want intimacy without the attachments of being intimate.

In a world that lacks the presence of God, many of the arguments against adultery have been muted. A society that encourages its members to live in the moment and do what feels good is unable to muster much moral outrage at those who seek to free themselves from life’s entanglements. Marriage is merely a helpful arrangement. If it interferes with the pursuit of happiness then it should be forgotten. After all, the logic goes, we are all adults and nobody is getting hurt.

The seduction of adultery is its promise of happiness. The price of adultery is the destruction of intimacy with the spouse and damage to one’s spiritual relationship with God. In profound ways, believers recognize that adultery does hurt people. So even in a new age, Christians affirm the seventh commandment, “You shall not commit adultery.”

It is a word from the Lord.

Written by Bob Fox, pastor, Faith Baptist Church, Georgetown, Ky.

You Shall Not Steal

Exodus 20:15

Theme: Obedience to God's prohibition against stealing enhances the life of the community and helps ensure a meaningful existence.

Introduction

As parents try to teach their children that stealing is wrong, they say things like, "You mustn't take anything that doesn't belong to you. That's stealing." For the preschooler reaching for a candy bar at the grocery checkout or an older child who wants his friend's cool new action figure, this explanation may be sufficient. While being told they can't have what they want because it's not theirs may seem a bit confusing, they generally accept it because they are beginning to understand that the adult world *is* confusing.

Young children usually accept simple instructions and explanations. They may not like them, but they are relatively powerless to challenge or change them. Besides, when they get caught, punishment generally follows. As they grow and learn, however, it's a different story. The art of living within the lines—or redrawing the lines—is challenging and exciting.

As teenagers confront the world beyond their parents' immediate control, for example, they learn that not everything in secular society is black or white, right or wrong. They discover that the shadings and boundaries of the gray areas are somewhat open to interpretation. They learn to

rationalize and justify in order to get things they want and to do it without appearing to have done anything wrong.

While teenagers may agree that it's wrong to steal a candy bar from the corner store, ask them what they think about copying a friend's homework or submitting essays they find (or buy!) on the Internet. Or, ask them what they think about downloading music from a Web site. Is it stealing? Many are likely to begin their answer with the words, "It's not *really* stealing because..."

Not all teenagers outgrow this way of thinking. In fact, the same parents who might tell their young children that they mustn't take things that don't belong to them and their teenagers that plagiarism is stealing might settle into their favorite recliner after a hard day at work to watch satellite programming provided through a "pirate" card. But that's not *really* stealing, is it? After all, everyone does that.

Sound familiar? What about padding expense accounts, exploiting "legal loopholes" on income tax returns, lending or borrowing computer programs to be copied onto the hard drive or even photocopying recipes from a friend's cookbook? Do any of these examples hit close to home?

The Biblical Witness

Exodus 20:15

You shall not steal.

You shall not steal. Can it be any simpler than that? Don't take things that don't belong to you. Simple. Clear. A strong peg on which to hang Christian character and integrity. People will know you by your fruit. A bad apple spoils the whole barrel. And speaking of apples ... let's go back to the beginning.

In the Beginning...

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Out of nothing God made the sun, moon, stars, earth, seas, vegetation, birds, fish, animals of every conceivable shape and size and people. God made Adam in the divine image, a complex and wonderful creature; then Eve, a companion for the man and a partner in the enterprise of life, a co-worshipper of the eternal God. Adam and Eve lived in the garden of Eden, a place of spectacular beauty and abundance. An unspoiled paradise.

Life in the garden was simple and good. It was pure. Creation was in perfect balance. God was present and available. And God gave the man and the woman one command: “Don’t eat from the tree in the middle of the garden, the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. That one doesn’t belong to you. That tree is mine. You shall not steal. And, Adam and Eve, this is serious. If you steal, you will die.” How could they get it wrong? How could they miss the warning?

Paradise Lost

Adam and Eve were innocent to the schemes of the evil one. They didn’t know he could not be trusted. He twisted the truth, bent the rules, tried to steal God’s place and God’s power. They were easily fooled.

They didn’t mean any harm, never intended to hurt anyone. It isn’t *that* big of a deal, is it? Surely God didn’t really mean that they would die! But it was too late. Sin slipped into the garden and brought with it shame, guilt, pride and death. Creation became disoriented. Bad company corrupted good character.

God acted quickly and, though they couldn’t see it at the time, mercifully. God cursed the serpent and banished Adam and Eve from the garden. Tough love. Outside the garden, they soon discovered a world very different from God’s kingdom. Life was hard and God was neither present nor available. The forbidden fruit left a bitter after-taste.

The goodness of the garden, of God, and of themselves—the goodness they once took for granted—became a mirage in their memories. Stealing became a way of life. Lying and deceit became tools for shifting blame, covering up, moving on, getting ahead. Evil took root in the soul of humanity.

A Fresh Start

Time passed. Generations came and went. God watched from a distance and grieved. With a pain-filled heart, God resolved to “blot out from the earth the human beings” (Gen 6:7). It was time for a fresh start, a new batch of humanity. It was time to grow a new and better people—a people who would honor God and obey a simple rule: You shall not steal.

Noah was a good man, a righteous man, a patient man. Good stock. God plucked Noah, his wife and their three sons and their wives from the corruption and violence and started over. The slate was wiped clean. Or was it?

Generations came and went. God watched from a distance and grieved again. Another batch gone wrong. Another man called from the rubble. “OK, Abram, let’s try this again. I’ll do the work—you just go where I tell you and do what I tell you. And Abram, trust me. We’re in this together, and I’m going to look out for you. I’ll be your shield. No need to

steal, Abram. I'll give you and your offspring all the land that you see stretching out to the north, south, east and west."

Abram, a righteous man, believed God. God blessed Abram and delivered his enemies into his hands. And Abram didn't steal. Even when the king of Sodom tried to make a deal, Abram held fast. He said, "I have sworn to the LORD, God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal-thong or anything that is yours..." (Gen 14:22-23). Abram passed the test of character, and God was pleased. You shall not steal.

A Long History

Just as God said, Abram and Sarai (now Abraham and Sarah) had a son, Isaac, and the Hebrew people—God's chosen people—multiplied. The baton was passed. Generations came and went. God wrote the rules on stone tablets. You shall not steal. But many did. They stole birthrights, blessings, freedom, innocence, reputations, wives—anything that wasn't tied down!

But God was patient. The people were a stubborn and rebellious lot. God sent prophets to remind them that theirs was a jealous God and a righteous God. And God reminded them: You shall not steal. When the people obeyed, God blessed them. When they turned their backs on God and did as they pleased, calamity came upon them. Repentance and blessing became well-worn tracks in the sand of Hebrew history.

A long history. Generations came and went. Then a change in direction—new tracks. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The Word became flesh. You shall not steal. Jesus fleshed it out. He showed us how to live life without stealing, trusting in God's provision. He didn't change the rules; He lived by them, perfectly. He demonstrated a new ethic—the ethic of

the kingdom of God—and taught us to pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. As it was in the beginning, as it was intended in the garden.

Preventing Theft Today

We come from a long line of thieves. It's in our blood. Our culture expects it. Locks are for honest people. Yet God's law is engraved on our hearts: You shall not steal.

It is a rule for every generation and for every culture. Stealing is wrong, always. But what if the law says it's OK? It's still wrong.

In our society, governed by human-made rules, ethics are negotiated, debated, manipulated, amended and then passed into law and public policy. Secular morality is free-floating. Kingdom ethics, on the other hand, are received. No room for tweaking. No concessions to political correctness. Christian morality is rooted in the Word of God.

The Bible warns: "There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death" (Prov 14:12). Rules made by people may allow for a little stealing here and a little stealing there, but they pave a wide path to death. Living out the morality for which we were created leads to abundant life.

But here's the thing. Living according to kingdom ethics in a world that prides itself on its ability to contrive its own (secular) ethics means that we will be confronted with all kinds of fences to mend. Poverty, homelessness, the consequences of various addictions for individuals and their families, depression and despair—in fact, pretty much all of the social and global ills facing our world today are a direct result of our individual and collective failure to submit to God's authority.

When sin entered the garden, creation became disoriented. The delicate and perfect balance of God's handiwork was thrown askew.

Jesus came into this world, in all of its sinfulness and confusion. He came, not to "fix" it, but to teach and preach the nearness of the kingdom of God. He came to demonstrate for us kingdom living. The wages of sin is death, just as God had warned Adam and Eve, but the good news is that the penalty has been paid. God calls us—those who are genuine disciples of Jesus—to continue the ministry until He returns. We're to live according to kingdom ethics, even while we live amongst the ruin and rubble of a society gone wrong.

God doesn't ask us to fix the world but to be faithful. God sends us out on fence-mending missions, using our time and our talents and our treasures to bring hope to those who can see no hope. Whether it is a neighbor who loses a job, a community in El Salvador destroyed by an earthquake or a child in Africa orphaned by AIDS and now living with the deadly virus, we are to be out and about in the world, tending to those who have been pillaged by the greed of people and the spirit of evil.

When the rich young ruler came to Jesus, inquiring as to what he must do to inherit eternal life, he claimed to have followed all of the rules. It wasn't enough. And it's not enough for us, either! We are saved by grace, through faith and for a purpose. We are living sacrifices, flesh and blood witnesses of God's transforming power. God calls us to roll up our sleeves and take the gospel and God's mercy and grace to those, near and far, who are still captives in the kingdom of this dark world.

Written by Lois Mitchell, director of Public Witness and Social Concerns for the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches and Canadian Baptist Ministries, Deer Island, New Brunswick, Canada.

You Shall Not Bear False Witness

Exodus 20:16

Theme: Healthy, stable relationships and community life are built upon honesty and trust.

Introduction

SPIN. It's all about how one spins the facts. During an election year when candidates are hurling charges and countercharges, presenting facts to gain an advantage has become the stuff of politics. The truth becomes obscured by slick sloganeering. Expediency and self-interests always make it tempting to compromise the truth.

With great ease the American public has come to embrace lying as a favorite past time. A friend of mine used to chuckle when he shared a contemporary aphorism. Making it sound much like scripture, he would say, "A lie is an abomination unto the Lord . . . and a very present help in time of trouble."

In the Bible the concept of *truth* and the concept of *reality* are virtually the same. The quest for truth evolves into one's ability to understand and respond redemptively to what is real. Any misrepresentation of reality is a violation of the ninth commandment. The spirit of the commandment encompasses more than spoken words. One might well wonder if all the commandments are not grafted into this idea of what constitutes reality. The denial or distortion of reality certainly encroaches on the sanctity of truth.

For instance, the distance between “you shall not steal” and “you shall not bear false witness” is not great at all.

Because she was courageous and ethical enough to blow the whistle on the Enron Corporation, Sherron Watkins was named one of *Time Magazine’s* Persons of the year in 2002. In speaking to students at Samford University on February 19, 2004, she recounted the collapse of a once great corporation, recalling the declaration of bankruptcy on December 2, 2001. The next day 5000 Enron employees received the announcement that they were in receipt of their last paycheck. It was later learned that executives had raided coffers in order to protect themselves.

Watkins observed, “It’s the slow steps to disaster we all must pay attention to.”

Some would contend that the graft and greed among Enron executives was a violation of the eighth commandment and, indeed, it was. However, the ninth commandment that prohibits embracing what is false or unreal speaks to the foundation on which all fabrications are built.

Could it be that all sin begins with our willingness to believe what is false?

Even the first commandment summons us to ultimate reality in the exclusive acknowledgement of the one true God. The rejection of idolatry is one way of embracing reality and renouncing fantasy and falsehood. When Jesus said, “I am the Truth,” he was not only identifying with God who had revealed himself to Moses (this is one of the “I AM” affirmations), but he was also saying that truth and reality find their full expression in him.

Being truthful encompasses more than telling the truth.

The Biblical Witness

Exodus 20:16

The Larger, Worldwide Context

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Israel had become a covenant community relating to God on the basis of an agreement with Abraham. The agreement had global implications: “in you (Abraham) all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:1-3). This covenant was the basis of hope through all the years of bondage in Egypt. However, the covenant was never ratified until Moses brought the emancipated Israelites to Mount Sinai where the law was given. Set in two tables of stone, the Ten Commandments provided the basis of a legal code for the young nation. Often called the Decalogue (meaning *Ten Words*), each commandment became a governing principle for an orderly society.

Israel was not the first nation to have a written law. Others included those of Ur-Nammu (Sumerian, ca. 2040 B.C.), Lipit-Ishtar (Sumerian, ca. 1900 B.C.), Eshnunna (Akkadan, ca 1875 B.C.), and Hammurabi (Babylonia, ca 1690 B.C.)

The law of the covenant became an adhesive force holding together what was once a loose confederacy of heterogeneous slaves. The life of the nation was now regulated by law. Each commandment flows from the character of God who is both deliverer and lawgiver. Jochem Douma observes that the commandments follow the gospel of undeserved deliverance. The ninth commandment is illustrative of this point.

The Necessity and Probable Origin of the Ninth Commandment

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Ex 20:16). More than likely, the law itself was divinely crafted to insure the integrity of the legal system. Of course, the principle of being truthful extends far beyond a court of law. The main verb in the prohibition means “to answer” or “to respond” during a legal proceeding to a charge brought against another member of the covenant community (neighbor).

In the ancient world it was most unusual for a nation to provide protection for the accused who was presumed guilty until proven innocent. Something like the ninth commandment can be seen in the Code of Hammurabi when a false witness is sentenced to the punishment appropriate to the crime for which he has accused another. In the covenant community, all participants in the justice system must have a passion for truth. Judge, accuser, advocate and witnesses must be careful and cautious in establishing charges, presenting evidence and executing justice.

For Israel there had to be more than one witness before a member of the community was put on trial. “A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained” (Deut 19:15). A single witness was insufficient to put someone to death (Num 35:30; Deut 17:6).

Persons found guilty of a capital offense were often executed by the witnesses themselves. Throwing the first stone was a procedural deterrent against presenting flippant, erroneous charges (see Jn 8:7). False witnesses, when discovered, were met with a severe punishment. “The judges shall make a thorough inquiry. If the witness is a false witness, having testified falsely against another, then

you shall do to the false witness just as the false witness had meant to do to the other” (Deut 19:18-19).

The Spirit of the Law

The record of this commandment is expressed also in Deuteronomy 5:20. In English there is virtually no difference when comparing Exodus 20:16 with the Deuteronomic Code. However, William Barclay, in citing the Hebrew language, noted a subtle difference.

The Exodus commandment refers to a lying witness, to speaking an *untruth*. The meaning behind Deuteronomy 5:20 is a prohibition against *insincere* or *frivolous* testimony. In *The Ten Commandments for Today* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), Barclay draws a powerful conclusion:

“...one of the most interesting facts about the Jewish law is that the man who refuses to give evidence, when he has evidence to give, is condemned as severely as the man who gives false evidence ... (Leviticus 5:1). It is an important principle that a cowardly or careless and irresponsible silence can be as senseless a crime as false and lying speech. The sin of silence is as real as the sin of speech.”

The Christian and Reality (Truth)

It is possible to speak the truth and live a lie.

Just as the Israelites experienced God’s intervention and deliverance from Egyptian slavery, the Christian also knows something about a costly deliverance from sin and self. Our salvation is shaped by a new covenant, not ratified by laws carved in stone, but by the blood of Christ’s cross.

It stands to reason that the highest standard for truth was embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. Consequently, the

spirit of the ninth commandment continues to influence the life of all believers. Being real and authentic becomes the quest of every growing Christian and involves the repudiation of all forms of hypocrisy.

Falsehood, misrepresenting what is real, flies in the face of both the Old and New Covenants. One only has to use the imagination to creatively concoct new means of deceit. Big lies or little white lies, fibs or flatteries, all come under the rubric of the ninth commandment. The apostle Paul castigates the Corinthians for quarreling, slander and gossip (2 Cor 12:20); the Ephesians, too (Eph 4:31).

What does Tennyson say of a lie that is a half-truth? In “The Grandmother” he wrote:

“A lie which is *half* a truth is ever the blackest of lies:
A lie which is all a lie may be met and fought with
outright.
But a lie which is *part* a truth is a harder matter to
fight.”

Gossip is a hideous, injurious form of falsehood. Using spoken words to besmirch a person’s reputation is called slander. Printing those words is called libel. Many a leader in the Body of Christ has been convicted in the court of public opinion, never to be restored to a place of usefulness. Innuendo and hearsay are effective conduits for misinformation.

Philip Ryken spoke forcefully in *Written in Stone* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003):

“If we are scholars, we are called to be careful with our quotations and fair with our criticisms. If we are politicians, we are called to be honest about our record, as well as that of our opponents. If we are in business, we are called to

deal honestly with people. If we are journalists, we are called to get the story straight . . . Every discipline has its own deceptions, but whatever lies people tell in our line of work, we are called to tell the truth.”

In order to avoid being brutal, we must speak the truth in love according to the biblical admonition (Eph 4:15).

Speaking Truthfully

Everybody does it. We fudge on the truth to our own advantage. The distortion of truth and the spinning of the facts and circumstances constitute a moral pandemic in our age. David Callahan’s *The Cheating Culture* (2004) is replete with anecdotal evidence and hard data indicating that duplicity and hypocrisy are rife in American culture.

Employment agencies and executive headhunters warn us that falsifying resumes has dramatically increased in recent years. Padding expense accounts, music piracy and acts of plagiarism are all too common. The best athletes money can buy have made their way into virtually every level of sports. Pressures to get ahead encourage deception.

Shareholders in the software company Veritas—which ironically is the Latin word for *truth*—experienced a 20 percent reduction in their holdings in 2002. And why? It was disclosed that the CFO, Kenneth Lonchar, had lied about having an MBA from Stanford. He was the one who also affixed his signature to the earnings reports. Honesty and authenticity have become counter-cultural values.

Obeying the ninth commandment is more needed than displaying the ninth commandment.

Written by Gary P. Burton, pastor, Pintlala Baptist Church, Hope Hull, Ala.

You Shall Not Covet

Exodus 20:17

Theme: God prohibits unbridled desire for what we do not have because it can diminish another person and become more important than doing the divine will.

Introduction

Well-known television evangelist Jim Bakker and his wife Tammy Faye started out innocently enough. After graduating from Bible college, Bakker had the dream of spreading the gospel through the medium of television. It's hard to tell when or how the transformation took place, but before long the desire to spread the gospel got lost in desire to build an empire.

This simple man with a genuine desire was transformed into one who would ask widows on Social Security to dip into their limited incomes to help him build theme parks and pay for an increasingly lavish lifestyle.

When Bill Clinton was running for president, his campaign manager, James Carville, placed a sign in the campaign's war room. The words on that sign—"It's the economy, stupid"—were designed to keep the campaign focused and on-message.

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush encouraged Americans not to let the terrorists defeat us. How did he encourage us to fight

back? By buying war bonds? By conserving oil and other resources?

No. We were encouraged to go about the business of America, i.e. buying, selling, and continuing to build our standard of living.

Research into the spending patterns of Americans, even those in evangelical churches, reveals that the average American contributes approximately 2 percent of his or her income to charitable causes of every kind. Many religious sociologists have raised concerns about the future funding pattern of the church, because those in the boomer generation and younger are not giving to the church with the same consistency or at the same level as the previous generations.

One reason is that these generations are living with a higher level of personal debt. They are seeking to accrue all the symbols of success at the front end of their lives. Consequently, they have little room for charity.

You might be asking yourself what this string of information has to do with the tenth commandment. Coveting is a serious sin, one that strikes at the very character of our being, our outlook on life and the ties that bind us together in community.

Its seriousness arises out of its often subtle and hidden nature. We can be seduced into covetousness before we realize it. That seduction ranges from living life a certain way because it is the societal norm to believing the grass is greener on the other side of the fence to the raw declaration "greed is good."

Before we apply the aforementioned examples to this commandment, we need to consider its meaning more closely.

The Biblical Witness

As you consider this final commandment, keep in mind that the “ten words” of which it is a part stand at the beginning of a covenant between God and the people of Israel.

In our highly individualized and compartmentalized culture, we often slight the corporate dimension of this commandment. We can readily see how this commandment addresses us individually, but we are less able to see how this prohibition works itself out within a group. Before looking at the ways coveting works itself out, we need to explore the particulars of this commandment.

Attitudes As Well As Actions

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

What does it mean to covet? Unlike the prior commandments, this one addresses not only action but also attitude. Some commentators limit the extent of this commandment strictly to one's disposition. Others argue that the force of the Hebrew verb includes both thought and deed. There is no doubt that the intensity of coveting leads to action. If truth be told, the mindset of covetousness opens the door to murder, adultery, stealing and bearing false witness. So what does this state of mind involve? The New Jerusalem Bible translates the commandment as, “You shall not set your heart on...,” while the New Century Version renders it, “You must not want to take...”

Both get closer to the force of this command than do most other translations. The root meaning of the Greek word for *covet* is “a violent movement,” (e.g. a volcanic eruption). Coveting, therefore, is undisciplined, unrestrained desire for that which rightfully belongs to another or others that results in one or more violent acts towards one's neighbor.

Against God and Neighbors

Within the context of God's covenant with God's people, this offense against one's neighbor is primarily and ultimately an affront to God. Writers of both Hebrew scripture and the New Testament equate covetousness with greed, and they understand greed to be rooted in either a lack of faith in God's provision or a callous disregard for God's commissioning humanity as stewards of God's possessions.

So covetousness is more than a petty misdemeanor; rather, it strikes at the heart of who we are in relationship with God and with our neighbor.

Three times the phrase “your neighbor's” appears in this commandment. No doubt, those of us who desire to hide behind either legalism or avoidance will ask with the lawyer, “And who is my neighbor?” (Lk 10:29). In considering the implications of this commandment, we would do well to hear again the closing exchange between Jesus and the lawyer:

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise’” (Lk 10:36-37).

The Loving Alternative

As followers of Jesus Christ, our basic stance toward those around us should be mercy. Mercy is not merely the willingness to forgive wrongs done to us, though it certainly is that. Mercy is a quality of living that is rooted in the character of God. The Hebrew word for mercy is *hesed*, which describes a quality of faithful loving-kindness. As God's people we are called to live in and out of God's faithful love. We are called to be neighbor.

Jesus reminds us that loving God results in being neighbor. Our ability and willingness to love our neighbor grows out of God's love for us and our love for God. Therefore, we move beyond ourselves, toward others within the sphere of God's mercy (see Mic 6:8). Neighborliness is defined by God's character and action, not our perceptions.

It is easy to see, then, how the prophets, as well as Jesus and Paul, understood greed and covetousness to be at the heart of human sinfulness (see Lk 12:13-21; Rom 1:28ff; Jer 6:13ff).

A Heinous Sin

The key question to determining whether or not one has broken the tenth commandment is not so much, "Can I identify specific instances where I have longed for something someone else had?" Rather, we need to ask, "How do I approach those who live with me in this world? Are they people I am going to use to get ahead, to acquire what I want, to do what I do not want to do? Or are they fellow beneficiaries of God's providence with whom I join to tend God's world?"

To covet that which belongs to my neighbor is to covet that which belongs to God. It is to seek to exact an additional

blessing from God through my neighbor and to my neighbor's harm.

Notice a progression of sorts in this commandment: "...house...wife...slave...ox...anything..." The list starts with our neighbor's house, which represents the basic physical needs of food, clothing and shelter. It moves to the level of relationships and on to economic viability and productiveness, and finally to a blanket statement about any other aspect of our neighbor's life.

To deprive my neighbor of life's essential needs, relationships and means of being a productive member of society is heinous sin, one which Israel's prophets warned against. Jesus' parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus stands within that tradition.

We're in This Together

To return to the place we began this discussion of tenth commandment: the biblical record is clear. Every individual transgression of this commandment negatively affected the community, and communal transgressions had catastrophic consequences for individuals.

Joshua 7 records the incident of Achan's sin. As the people of Israel conquered the land of Caanan, they were given specific instructions not to take any spoils for themselves. Unable to see the riches of the Caananites destroyed, Achan decided to take some of it for himself and hide it in his tent. This transgression brought military defeat to the Israelites. Besides the corporate consequences of Achan's covetousness, the writer of Joshua begins the story, "But the Israelites broke faith in regard to the devoted things..."

Note that one person's sin is inseparable from the community.

The prophetic writings are full of denunciations of corruption and injustice brought on by the greed and avarice of kings, priests and businessmen. Whenever the nation's leaders desired more and more, individuals suffered. Solomon's desire for power and wealth corrupted his wisdom and resulted in a civil war that tore apart Israel.

Keeping Desires in Check

In the movie "Wall Street," Gordon Gekko (played by Michael Douglas) concludes his speech at the Stockholders' Meeting of Teldar Paper with these words: "The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that greed...is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all its form—greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge—has marked the upward surge of mankind."

By contrast, Henlee Barnett, long-time Baptist ethicist, wrote, "[Covetousness] is an inward motive which gives birth to the overt sins of murder, adultery, lying, and stealing..."

We began by surveying several incidents that may seem loosely connected at best. However, each in its own way illustrates the insidious nature of covetousness.

In the instance of the Bakkers, it has the power to corrupt even the most worthy of intentions. The illustrations from the lives and rhetoric of two presidents demonstrate the power of covetousness to motivate the lives and habits of Americans. Indeed one could make the case that the strength of our economic system depends on undisciplined, unre-

strained desire. Finally, the desire to have what we have not worked to produce puts many of us in the situation of possessing many things, but not being free to share anything.

George W. Truett once proclaimed: "This sin of covetousness is all consuming...The poor and the needy are often neglected...The covetous man is blinded to his opportunity of fortifying some unfortunate man or woman beaten and broken in the battle of life."

So how do we keep from falling into this insidious state of mind and action? By adhering to the first and great commandment: to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. In a sense, the last commandment drives us back to the first.

Gekko is right about one thing. Our relationship toward what we have clarifies the essence of our spirit.

Written by Jim Holladay, pastor, Lyndon Baptist Church, Louisville, Ky.

Fear God Alone

Exodus 20:18-21

Theme: God bridges the huge moral gulf that exists between God and people. Our proper response to God's moral supremacy is holy reverence.

Introduction

On August 6, 1999, a man walked into a business in Pelham, Alabama, and shot two people to death. Before anyone could stop him, he went to a business down the street and killed another person.

In November of that same year, two drivers got into an altercation along Interstate 65 south of Pelham when one thought the other had cut her off. They played cat-and-mouse for a while, according to witnesses, weaving from lane to lane. Then they exited the freeway and stopped. When Gena Foster got out of her car and approached Shirley Henson's vehicle, Henson shot her in the face, killing her almost instantly.

"What if I had been there?" I remember thinking on both of those occasions. "That could've been me!"

At the time, I lived only a five-minute drive from where these crimes occurred and had traveled that Interstate and the streets to those businesses many times. The well-heeled suburb of Birmingham I then called home had suddenly become a fearful place.

When, as an adult, have you been fearful?

Was it when a truck filled with fertilizer and fuel oil was deliberately exploded outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, killing 168?

Was it in 1997, following deadly shootings in high schools in otherwise quiet Pearl, Mississippi, or West Paducah, Kentucky?

Was it on April 20, 1999, the day of the bloodiest school shooting in US history, when two high school students in Littleton, Colorado, methodically killed 12 students and one teacher and injured scores of others before committing suicide?

Or was it after any of the dozens of other violent school and workplace shootings across the US and around the world since then?

Still raw from these experiences, we watched in numb silence on September 11, 2001, as terrorists turned commercial airliners into missiles and guided them into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania.

The resulting "war on terror" continues to dominate headlines, and many days, it seems that terror has the upper hand.

Our world is indeed a frightening place. Should we not be afraid?

Perhaps we are afraid of the wrong things.

"It is the most natural thing in the world to be scared," Oswald Chambers was quoted as saying, "and the clearest evidence that God's grace is at work in our hearts is when

we do not get into panicsThe remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else.”

Within God’s plan, rooted in the words God spoke to the people of Israel that we now call the Ten Commandments, we can live free from fear when we rightly fear God. Live this way, God said, and you will live in right relationships with the Almighty and with others.

What does it mean to fear God? And how can fearing God enable us to live faithfully and unafraid in an otherwise frightening world?

The Biblical Witness

Cleanly woven throughout scripture is the theme of fearing God. Abraham, Jacob, Noah, Joshua, Samuel, Job, David, Jonah and others feared the LORD. Throughout their history, the people of Israel were admonished to fear God. Fear of the LORD was, in fact, often used as a motivation for obedience and faithfulness to God’s commands. Even the Egyptian midwives feared the LORD, defying the king’s orders to take the lives of the Hebrew children (Ex 1:17, 21).

Overwhelmingly within the biblical witness, fear of God refers to reverence toward and worship of the Almighty. Over 120 times, more than 40 in the Psalms alone, scriptures use the phrase this way. Scripture also regularly joins fearing God and keeping God’s commandments.

“The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul,” the Psalmist wrote, “the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoic-

ing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinance of the LORD are true and righteous altogether” (Ps 19:7-9).

Those who fear the LORD are happy and blessed, the Psalmist said, and the LORD takes pleasure in them (see Ps 128:1, 4; 147:11).

The fear of the LORD is wisdom, Job declared (Job 28:28), a fact the writer of Proverbs repeated. “In the fear of the LORD one has strong confidence,” the Proverbs writer also asserted (Prov 14:26), later declaring that the fear of the LORD is “life indeed” (Prov 19:23).

The writer of Ecclesiastes put it bluntly: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone” (Eccl 12:13).

Through the Prophets, God regularly admonished the people to fear the LORD and do what was morally right: “I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me for all time, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them, never to draw back from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts, so that they may not turn from me” (Jer 32:39-40).

Sometimes in our efforts to race toward his “do not be afraid; you are of more value than sparrows” assurance, we miss Jesus’ words that precede them. “Do not fear those who kill the body but who cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28).

Later, in his call to holy living, Peter admonishes the exiles of the dispersion to “live in reverent fear” (1 Pet 1:17).

Interestingly, scripture repeatedly records occasions—more than 60 of them—where the LORD or a representative of the LORD encourages people *not* to be afraid. Clearly, fear of the LORD is something desirable and altogether different from fear of anything else. Many of the same people who feared the LORD were also told, “do not be afraid,” when it came to other people and circumstances: Abraham, Joseph, Moses, the people of Israel, Joshua, David, Elijah, Solomon, Jacob.

To the women who first appeared at his empty tomb, Jesus said, “Do not be afraid” (Matt 28:10). To all of us, he says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid,” (Jn 14:27).

How do we live faithfully and unafraid in a frightening world?
By fearing God alone.

Exodus 20:18 **Amazing Sights and Sounds**

¹⁸When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance,

These verses reiterate what the people of Israel experienced as recorded in Exodus 19:16-19: thunder, lightning, a thick cloud on the mountain and “a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled” (19:16).

God had previously told Moses to consecrate the people and prepare them for the experience of entering the presence of the Almighty. “Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the LORD will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people” (19:10b-11).

God further instructed Moses to set limits for the people and warn them not to go up to the mountain or touch it. “Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death” (19:12). The trumpet blast would be their signal to go up on the mountain, God said.

On the third day, Mount Sinai was “wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it like fire” (19:18), and the mountain shook violently. Each time Moses spoke to God, God answered him with thunder.

From this awe-inspiring stage God spoke directly to the people, giving them what Hebrew tradition calls “the ten words.” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* reminds us that this event “stands alone as the only direct, unmediated address of command from Yahweh to Israel. This is the only speech heard directly by Israel” (Vol. 1, p. 854). Thereafter, God spoke to them through mediators such as Moses, prophets and priests.

No wonder, then, that the people trembled and stood at some distance. They were witnessing the Almighty, and the experience was almost more than they could bear. God’s holy presence exposed their sinfulness and moral failures with piercing clarity.

Exodus 20:19 **The People’s Response**

¹⁹and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.”

The people’s direct encounter with the Almighty was so powerful and overwhelming that they were afraid to repeat it, and in fact, seemed to think they needed protection from it. They asked Moses to serve as a mediator between God and them.

They had grown accustomed to Moses’ leadership and instructions. Though they were sometimes quarrelsome and complained when life became difficult, they did trust him. He had for some time taught them about God and God’s expectations. It was one thing to hear it from Moses; it was quite another to hear it from God. The experience was such that they did not think they would live if it were to happen again.

To their credit, the people appear to have wanted someone to help them know how to live, because they told Moses they would listen to him. Additional commandments did come, but none could compare in authority and purpose with these “ten words” they heard directly from the Almighty.

Exodus 20:20-21 Fear Only God

²⁰Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.” ²¹Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

“Do not be afraid,” Moses told the people, but do fear God. Respect God and show allegiance and commitment to God by obeying these words. Live life God’s way, and your lives

will not be characterized by sin and disobedience, and you will have no reason to fear.

Notice the physical contrast between Moses and the people. The people “stood at a distance,” but Moses “drew near,” unafraid to enter the “thick darkness where God was.”

Moses was no stranger to dialogue with God. Yet his familiarity with God did not cause him to approach God cavalierly or disrespectfully. Indeed, the more acquainted with God and God’s ways Moses became, the more aware he seemed to grow of the holiness of God and the sinfulness of humanity. And the more he knew how much he and the people needed God’s instructions about how to live as they formed this new nation.

As they learned, we too become the people of God by living life God’s way, fearing God and God alone.

Monument or Movement?

Mood of the Nation, an annual Gallup poll conducted in January 2004, found that 64 percent of Americans are dissatisfied with the country’s moral and ethical climate.

Those conducting the poll said that this “fairly dim view” was likely influenced, among other things, by recent corporate scandals and the “wardrobe malfunction” at the Super Bowl’s halftime show.

Younger Americans expressed a more optimistic view about the nation’s morality; 53 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 29 said that they were satisfied with the country’s morality. Only 29 percent of adults ages 65 or older said that they were satisfied.

“Adults under the age of 30 grew up in the era of the Internet, music videos and cable television shows that continued to push the moral envelope,” said Gallup contributing editor Heather Mason, “and may not remember a time when profanity and sexual content were more taboo.”

People who are satisfied with the moral climate probably do not see any reason to change it. Some argue that posting the Ten Commandments in public places will convince them and culture as a whole to live differently.

That’s not likely to happen. Culture changes when individuals change their hearts and consequently their attitudes and actions.

Which is why God told the children of Israel to “keep these words I am commanding you today in your heart” (Deut 6:6). And why Jesus later said, “For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mk 7:21-23).

And why Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34-35).

We best honor the Ten Commandments when we live our lives in love.

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