

## ***“Ten Commandments: Don’t Even Think It”***

*Ephesians 4:17-5:5 • Matthew 5:17-30*

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One day, many years ago, when my son was in preschool – he was probably two or three – we were asking him about the sounds that different animals make. What does the cow say? Moo. What does the dog say? Woof, woof. What does the duck say? Quack, quack. Then for fun Leslie asked him, “What does your teacher say?” Without hesitating he said, “no, no, no!”

That’s probably what most people think the Ten Commandments are about. When you mention the Ten Commandments they hear, “no, no, no.” Or as the old King James version puts it, “Thou shalt not.” Of course that’s how most of the commandments are worded. In fact, in the original Hebrew the commandments we’re studying today are only two words each. No murder, no adultery, and no stealing. But as we’ve seen the past few weeks, there’s more to it than just saying no to things you want to do. God’s commandments give us boundaries and structure that allow us to have a flourishing society.

This morning we are going to look at the sixth, seventh, and eighth commandments. When I mentioned to someone last week that I was going to preach on all three in one message they wanted to know why. I said because all three are really about the same thing. They are all ways of violating the first commandment not to have anything more important than God. Murder, adultery, and stealing are all forms of idolatry. They are each ways of making your own desires more important than God and other people. So let’s look briefly at each one.

First is the sixth commandment found in Exodus 20:13. “You shall not murder.” Some Bible translations will say, “You shall not kill,” but murder is a better translation. For example, the Bible doesn’t prohibit self-defense. Also, the Bible does not prohibit the government from going to war, although there are limitations on what are valid reasons for war and on how wars are to be fought. Also, regardless of whether we

think they are good or bad for our society today the sixth commandment doesn’t prohibit capital punishment. Those are all situations where the taking of life is not a violation of the commandment.

So what *is* prohibited? Basically, this commandment prohibits taking innocent human life. Obviously homicide, or premeditated murder, is prohibited, as is manslaughter, which is intentional murder but not premeditated. Those seem obvious. The sixth commandment also prohibits reckless behavior that could lead to taking life. Drunk driving, for example. And it prohibits negligence. This is why we have laws that require you to have a fence around a swimming pool. You have to take appropriate precautions so that no one gets hurt. There is a similar law in Deuteronomy 22 that says that when you build a house you must make a parapet, a low wall, around the edge of your roof. In ancient times the roof was part of the living space and you were required to make sure it was safe so someone wouldn’t fall off. If you didn’t, you would be liable for his death. Other things prohibited in this commandment include euthanasia, which killing someone who is sick or dying, suicide, and abortion. All of those take an innocent human life.

The reason is that human life is precious. All lives matter to God. We find the reason at the very beginning of the Bible. Genesis 1:27 says, “God created humans in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female.” Human life is precious because each person is made in the image of God. And in 1 Corinthians 6 the Apostle Paul reminds us, “your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit within you...you are not your own, you were bought with a price.” In other words, to take another person’s life is actually an assault on God. As one author put it, “Every human life is precious. Unborn life is precious. Children with special needs are precious. Aging parents are precious—even when

they don't remember because they're suffering dementia, they're still made in the image of God. Nonverbal children or parents, those in a wheelchair, and those who are completely dependent upon others or doctors are precious." To think otherwise means we value something else more than we value God.

In our reading from Matthew 5 Jesus tells us that he did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. What he does is point us to the deeper meaning of the commandments. He shows us that what God is interested in is not just restraining our behavior. He's interested in our heart. So Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." Did he leave anyone out? We're not going to get into a word study on this passage but basically Jesus is referring to more than just name-calling. What he's warning against is the kind of anger that dehumanizes other people. Because once you think of someone as less than the image of God, it's easier to hurt or kill them. Our reading from Ephesians 4 makes the same point. "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice." According to Jesus, to nurse that kind of anger and hatred for someone else leads to hell.

Next, the seventh commandment says, "You shall not commit adultery." In today's world this may be the least favorite, most hated of the Ten Commandments. The word *adultery* comes from the Latin word that means "to corrupt." That's what adultery really is, a corrupting of marriage. Marriage has been under attack for some time, especially since the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s, which was all about making it acceptable to misuse God's gift of sex. But God is serious about marriage. Kent Hughes points out that "the frequency of the prohibition of adultery is second only to idolatry in the Old

Testament, and second to none in the New Testament."

We get a glimpse of why marriage is so important at the end of Ephesians 5 where Paul quotes Genesis 2:24, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." Then he adds, "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband." In other words, marriage is important because God intends that a husband and wife are to show the world how much Jesus loves the Church, which is called his bride.

Adultery, then, is anything that comes between a husband and wife. Again, Jesus shows us that it's not just physical. In verse 27 he says, "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 lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." He then says that this is serious enough to take radical action to root out the misplaced desire. As James 1 tells us, "each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death." Jesus warns us to deal with it sooner rather than later.

The eighth commandment is, "You shall not steal." I think the Heidelberg Catechism has a great description of what this commandment prohibits and requires. Question 110 asks, "What does God forbid in the eighth commandment?" The answer is, "He forbids not only outright theft and robbery, punishable by law. But in God's sight theft also includes cheating and swindling our neighbor by schemes made to appear legitimate, such as: inaccurate measurements of weight, size, or volume; fraudulent merchandising; counterfeit money; excessive interest; or any other means forbidden by God. In addition he forbids all greed and pointless squandering of his gifts."

Obviously this prohibits taking something that doesn't belong to you, whether it's money or possessions. Property crimes result in millions of dollars of loss every year. This kind of theft is illegal and everyone who does it knows what they are doing is wrong. But there are other kinds of stealing that people don't seem to realize are wrong. One day I was in the grocery store and there was a man switching eggs between cartons. He was putting jumbo eggs in a medium carton in order to save the 15 cent difference. This is a form of cheating mentioned in the catechism. Another type of stealing mentioned is inaccurate measures or weights. These days the government goes around and tests and certifies things like grocery store scales and gasoline pumps to ensure that we are not cheated. But people still violate this aspect of the commandment. For example, sometimes bars or restaurants will water down their alcohol to "stretch" it. Their customers are not getting what they paid for.

There are other, more subtle ways of violating the eighth commandment. A big one, especially in our city, is what is known as predatory lending. It's shocking the number of payday loan places there are. These are lenders who take advantage of people in a financial crisis and they charge unreasonable interest. It seems like every day we get offers for credit in the mail. Our shredder works overtime these days. One of those offers a couple of months ago would have come with a 42% interest rate. Needless to say we didn't take them up on their offer.

Plagiarism, using someone else's work as your own, is a form of stealing. Downloading or accessing online music and movies without paying for them is stealing. I used to work for a man who would delay paying his vendors as long as possible. That's a violation of the eighth commandment. So is wasting time at work, falsifying reports, and padding your expense account with personal expenses. It may seem insignificant but it's a big deal to God. The Holy Spirit says in Ephesians 4:28, "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing

honest work with his own hands." Then we get the reason: "so that he may have something to share with anyone in need." Question 111 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, "What does God require of you in this commandment?" The point is once again that the commandment is not just about what you are not to do, but also what you are to do instead. The answer is, "That I do whatever I can for my neighbor's good, that I treat others as I would like them to treat me, and that I work faithfully so that I may share with those in need."

God is interested in your giving. That leads to the final form of stealing we're going to discuss today. In Malachi 3, God says, "Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need." By the way, this is the only place God says for us to test him. The point is that the opposite of stealing is giving and God loves a cheerful giver.

I have two final thoughts on these commandments. First, Jesus shows us in each of these that it's not just our behavior that matters. It's not enough that you didn't kill someone or commit adultery or steal something. God is concerned with your heart, especially your love for other people. Murder, adultery, and theft are the complete opposite of love. They are ways of making yourself more important than others. As Jesus showed us, love is always sacrificial.

Second, Jesus is clear that each of these commandments has a positive command implied. In our reading from Matthew Jesus says that even if you are at the altar with your sacrifice, if you remember that someone has something against you, you are to go right then and be reconciled. If you have been angry or violent with someone, if you have done

something to damage your marriage, or if you have cheated someone, *you* need to work to restore the relationship and you need to repent and ask God to forgive you.

The last thought is a word of encouragement. None of these sins are unforgivable. There is nothing you have done or will do that puts you out of reach of God's forgiveness. Remember

that Jesus was crucified between two thieves, to men who repeatedly violated the eighth commandment. And Jesus told the one who repented, "today you will be with me in paradise." Friends, let these commandments point you to your need for a savior, because at his cross you find complete forgiveness.

*Amen.*