



# THE WEIGHTIEST WORDS

SERIES: RESTORING THE ANCIENT BOUNDARIES

Catalog No. 999  
 Various Texts  
 First Message  
 Brian Morgan  
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*"You shall have no other gods before Me.*

*You shall not make for yourself an idol...*

*You shall not take the name of your Lord in vain...*

*Observe the Sabbath to keep it holy...*

*Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged...*

*You shall not murder.*

*You shall not commit adultery.*

*You shall not steal.*

*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

*You shall not covet your neighbor's wife; and you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field or his manservant, his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor."*

David Roper, in his new book on the life of Elijah, *Seeing Through*, quotes Dartmouth professor Jeffrey Hart from a recent speech, published in the *Wall Street Journal*, bemoaning the moral deterioration of our nation:

A great many things happened all of a sudden in this country in the very recent past. Without going into the right and wrong of every case, I list them objectively. Within living memory, abortion was a felony in virtually every state in the nation. Today abortion is commonplace in America. Demands that it be federally funded are alleged to be rooted in the Constitution.

Within living memory, hard-core pornography was largely kept out of sight, usually by a rough agreement between sellers and authorities. Now the hard core stuff is available on your newsstand.

Within living memory, school children recited the Pledge of Allegiance every morning, and in many schools simple prayers. At Christmas time, they sang Christmas carols. Suddenly, all of that fell under proscription.

Within living memory, homosexuals were for the most part discreet. Suddenly, we find that they demand public legitimization of their peculiarity, stage parades and demand representation in governing bodies as a legitimate minority. Is there any question that a revolution has in fact been imposed upon an

unsuspecting nation?!

We are living in an age that seems to have no moral boundaries. "G. K. Chesterton once observed that morality, like art, consists of drawing a straight line. Now no one knows where to draw the lines!"<sup>2</sup> (Roper, *Seeing Through*, 20). Leading the campaign of moral confusion today are the television and radio talk show hosts. These self-appointed priests and priestesses of our time are pushing out the outer envelope, where no value is sacred except tolerance. So we are exhorted to permit all, accept all, embrace all and love all.

Who is at fault for this deterioration of values? Is it the media? Our educators? Our politicians? An ancient rabbi once said, "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men" (Matt 5:13, NASB). That rabbi, of course, was Jesus. He was addressing his warning to Israel, because the nation had lost its savor. In 70 AD, his prophetic words came true, when Jerusalem was trampled under foot by the Roman army. Today, the church has lost its way, because we too have neglected to adorn the doctrine of God with the beauty of his commandments. We must always remember that it is impossible to reconstruct the soul of the nation without first reconstructing the soul of the church.

Throughout the summer, our pastors and elders will be preaching an exposition of the Ten Commandments, in a series entitled, *Restoring the Ancient Boundaries*. Our purpose will be first, to explain what each commandment meant when it was first given to Moses; second, how it was applied in Israel's day (from the book of Deuteronomy); third, how Jesus and his apostles understood its application spiritually for the church; and fourth, how it applies in our contemporary world.

Some of you may be asking what the Ten Commandments have to do with Christianity. Hasn't the law been done away with in Christ? you say. Aren't we saved by grace through faith, and not by works of law? This morning I want to give a word of introduction regarding the importance of the Ten Commandments (which were known in Israel as the Ten Words, or the Covenant) in all of Scripture as a foundation for the rest of the studies to come.

Some years ago, I took our family on vacation in Oregon. Following a thunderstorm one morning, my youngest daughter and I went on a walk through a

meadow. Scattered pools of rainwater dotted the grass, reflecting the blue sky and the passing clouds as in an Impressionist painting. It was a beautiful sight. I asked my daughter to look into one of the pools and tell me what she saw. She stood over one puddle and, looking straight down into the water, said, "I see mud." Then I asked her to look at the pool from a slightly different angle and tell me what she saw. "I see the heavens!" she exclaimed.

I compare those puddles to the law: what you see depends on your vantage point and the condition of the heart that is looking into the mirror (to borrow James' term). This explains why the apostle Paul said that the law killed him (Romans 7), the commandment revealed sin, provoked sin, and then condemned sin in the flesh. But that same law brought life to the psalmist of Psalm 119, "O how I love your law. I meditate on your statutes and they bring me life." While it is true that Christians are not saved through works of law, nevertheless the law is a picture of Jesus, the Man from heaven. As we meditate upon it, we are prompted to love and to heavenly things from a converted heart.

So my task this morning is to answer the question, how important are the Ten Commandments? My answer will give seven reasons for their critical importance.

### **1. Their manner of revelation was unique**<sup>3</sup>

Exodus 19 describes the occasion of the giving of the Ten Commandments as a holy descent by God from heaven. That descent was accompanied by thunder and lightning, a thick cloud of darkness, loud trumpet sounds, and smoke and fire. The mountain quaked; the people were terror-stricken. Instant death was the fate of anyone who broke through.

This was the first time since the Garden of Eden that the holy God descended to dwell with man. William Cowper described the scene in these verses:

*Marshalling all his terrors as he came;  
Thunder, and earthquake, and devouring flame;  
From Sinai's top Yahweh gave the law—  
Life for obedience—death for ev'ry flaw.  
When the great Sov'rein would his will express,  
He gives a perfect rule; what can he less?*

There were no intermediaries, no emissaries, no interpreters and no expositors on this sacred occasion. God descended from heaven, met Moses face to face, and inscribed the commandments with his very finger on two tablets of stone. There is an infinite amount of authority behind that expression, "the finger of God." The term was not used again until Jesus said, in the NT, "If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11:20). The Ten Commandments are the weightiest words ever given!

### **2. Their form and manner of preservation were unique**

Notice that the Commandments are stated as abstract truths. Thus they are enduring, universal truths. The remainder of the law formed the specific application of these commandments for Israel while she resided in the land. The tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written were kept in the ark of the covenant, the gold box that symbolized that which lasts forever (Heb. 9:4)—a symbol of the very presence of heaven itself.

### **3. Their title was unique: Only the Ten Words were called *The Covenant***

While there is a Book of the Covenant (Exod 34:7), the specific word "The Covenant" (Deut 5:2, lit. "The LORD our God cut with us a covenant") speaks of the Ten Commandments and the arrangement by which God committed himself to Israel and Israel to himself (see Exod 34:28). Thus when Jeremiah spoke of a day when God would make a New Covenant with Israel by inscribing the Law on their hearts, he was referring specifically to a day when God's Spirit would inscribe the Ten Commandments on the human heart. In the New Covenant, therefore, the Ten Commandments remain as the core of our identity as Christians.

### **4. Their priority of place in the Canon of Scripture**

The Ten Commandments came first, then came the ceremonial law (Leviticus). The order indicates that ethics must precede worship. All throughout the Scriptures it is evident that worship without ethics is valueless. This is what Jesus himself taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

#### **(a) Worship had absolutely no value to God without ethics**

The prophet Jeremiah had similar words for the people of his day, when he said: "Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.'...Behold you are trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal, and walk after other gods that you have not known, then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—that you may do all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your sight?" (Jer 7:4, 8-11).

Not only was the ceremonial law based on the Ten Commandments, but the prophets also were to be judged both by the content of what they said and how one interpreted what they said by the Ten Commandments.

#### **(b) The Ten Commandments provided the basis for hermeneutics**

We find the first instance of this in Numbers 12. Two prophets, Aaron and Miriam, challenged Moses' authority, and God himself answered as to where the greater authority lay. God personally intervened to settle the dispute (Num 12:6-8):

“If there is a prophet among you,  
I the LORD, shall make Myself known to him in a vision.  
I shall speak with him in a dream.  
Not so, with My servant Moses,  
He is faithful in all my household;  
With him I speak mouth to mouth,  
Even openly and not in dark sayings,  
And he beholds the form of the LORD.  
Why then were you not afraid  
To speak against My servant, against Moses?”

God is saying that when he spoke through the prophets, he spoke in riddles and metaphors—in enigmatic terms. When he spoke with Moses, however, it was in a face to face encounter. Thus, if there is tension between what we understand Moses to be saying versus what we think the prophets are saying, Moses must take precedence. The clear revelation must never be overruled by what is unclear. The prophetic writings are given to evoke our imagination and to comfort the afflicted with the hope of a new world to come. But the pictures they paint can never overrule the written word; they are different modes of revelation.

### **(c) The Ten Commandments were the ultimate test of a true prophet**

In Deuteronomy, Moses wrote about the ministry of prophets who would come after him, and how to judge a false prophet: “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them’; you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul...that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death” (Deut 13:1-5).

Since the prophets were successors to Moses, they could not violate what Moses had said. Even if the prophet could perform miracles, that was not sufficient reason to follow him; rather, moral ethics were the supreme test. Bruce Waltke comments: “That false prophet was sent to test Israel, to see if she indeed loved the Lord or if she was looking for excuse to follow after her own lusts. That false prophets could do miracles suggests there is demonic ability in false prophets. It reveals to us that the Ten Commandments have the final arbitration of right and wrong. They are given greater authority for hermeneutics than anything else.” Ethics, not signs and wonders, are the test of the true prophet. Tragically, at times I have counseled people who claimed to have been led into immorality by God’s leading through circumstances.

Twelve months ago, an individual who claimed to have performed signs and wonders told me he had had a vision about me. He said that with fear and trepida-

tion, he had to tell me that I had a hard heart. He relayed to me that a demon had told him in a vision that the demon had possession of the Morgan family for 350 years. Referring to me, the demon had said in this vision, “He is mine.” I did not have much rest that night. The next day I pondered the words of Moses and Paul. I telephoned the man and asked him, “Am I to give your word more weight than the words of Moses, who said that the iniquity of the fathers would not go past the third generation, because of his loyal love? Am I to give your words more weight than the apostle Paul, who said that in Christ, I am a new creation? If there is any hardness in my heart, it is due to my own sinful choices, not some demon that an ancestor introduced 350 years ago.”

The words of Moses take precedence over signs and wonders.

### **5. In the ministry of Jesus, the Ten Words are upheld**

How did Jesus regard the Ten Commandments? He lived for them! He fulfilled the law. Here is what he said about them on one occasion: “Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:19). Jesus was horrified to see that religious tradition would break one of the commandments. The Pharisees challenged him with violating ceremonial laws of washing, but he retorted that they broke the commandment, “Honor your father and mother,” by urging people to withhold support of their parents and give their money to the temple instead (Mark 7:8). When Jesus held the cup of the New Covenant in the Upper Room, he declared that the Holy Spirit would write the Ten Commandments on the hearts of believers.

### **6. The gift of the Spirit writes the Ten Words on the human heart**

In the New Testament, all fulfilled application of the commandments was broadened and heightened to a new level. Even the Sabbath is transcended; not just one day is holy, but all time is holy to God.

On the feast of Pentecost, the Jews celebrate the giving of the law at Sinai. On that occasion, as we have seen, God descended from heaven in thunder, fire and smoke, and with his finger wrote the ten words on two tablets of stone. At Pentecost, Christ having fulfilled the law, God poured forth his Spirit to write the law on tablets of human hearts. So Paul would say that his credential as a true apostle was not some written letter of recommendation; the Corinthians themselves were his living letter, because their hearts bore testimony of changed lives in conformity to the Ten Commandments (2 Cor 3: 1-6).

The pastoral epistles list the qualities required of leaders of the church, and every requirement has to do with character. There is almost no mention as to their

“charismata” gifts (except “apt to teach,” which can be accomplished through a number of speaking gifts). How do the Ten Commandments land in a potential leader’s home, in his church, and in his workplace? Elders therefore might be mediocre in gift, but they must be impeccable in character. The Church today, however, seems to major on dynamic spiritual gifts and minor on character. But it is much better for a board of elders to be mediocre in gift but impeccable in character, than outstanding in gift but apt to compromise.

Finally, what will be the result if we neglect the Ten Commandments?

### **7. Warnings of rejecting the Ten Words are more severe in the NT than in the OT**

The writer of Hebrews describes the awe and terror of the first giving of the Law at Sinai, and compares and contrasts it to the heavenly realities the church enters into when it comes together:

“For you have not come to a mountain that may be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word should be spoken to them. For they could not bear the command, ‘If even a beast touches the mountain, it will be stoned.’ And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, ‘I am full of fear and trembling.’” (Heb 12:18-21).

But the warning from the writer of Hebrews is even more pronounced: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, must less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven...our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:22-25, 29).

### **So what shall we do? Deuteronomy 6:6-9**

God personally come down from heaven and wrote the law on tablets of stone by his very finger. Then he descended again in the person of his Son to fulfill the law. Finally, he descended a third time, at Pentecost, to write this law on human hearts. How should we respond to these heavenly initiatives?

#### **(a) Internalize the Word: Do not be ignorant**

“And these words, which I am commanding you to-

day, shall be on your heart” (Deut 6:6). If God has gone to such trouble, we should take time to learn his commandments. Carve out time to read his word and memorize it. When I spend time alone with God, the Holy Spirit prompts me to love him and love people. This is what the Spirit does through the commandments: he prompts us to love others.

#### **(b) Teach the Word**

“And you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up” (6:7).

The word “diligently” comes from the Hebrew root for the word *tooth*. When used as an adverb in this context it means to teach incisively, so that the teaching penetrates the core of their being. Parents are to teach in this manner in all places (in your house and when you walk by the way), and at all times (when you rise up and when you lie down). So we are to internalize and teach the Word.

Finally, we are to apply the Word.

#### **(c) Apply the Word**

“And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (6:8-9).

Let the commandments inform all of your thinking and actions. And don’t merely apply them in your private world. Boldly take them into the community and make them known. Don’t apologize for these commandments. They are the very foundation that holds lives, families and societies together. These are the things that make us profoundly human—and the world knows it. Therefore, stand up for what is right, no matter what it costs.

The best way for children to learn the commandments is by parents’ modeling the truth of them. So let us get rid of the idols in our homes. Let us challenge and expose injustice or unethical behavior at work. Then we shall adorn the doctrine of our God with beauty, and the world will be attracted to the gospel.

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1. David Roper, *Seeing Through* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 1995) 19-20.
2. Roper, *Seeing Through*, 20.
3. Special thanks to Dr. Bruce Waltke for these first four observations in his lecture “*The Origin of Prophecy*” given at Regent College, Vancouver, B.C., Canada.



# ONE LORD, ONE HEART

*SERIES: RESTORING THE ANCIENT BOUNDARIES*

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Deuteronomy 5:6-11  
Second Message  
Brian Morgan  
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## Introductory Observations to the Ten Commandments

I was eight years old when I was first instructed in the Ten Commandments. Up to that point I had my own ethical standards about swearing. One day I was playing basketball with a friend, and after he had missed a shot, he used bad language. I said to him, "Russell, you've got a foul mouth!" He said, "You're worse than me. You take God's name in vain! And you know what the Scripture says? 'He will not leave you unpunished!'" From that day on my view of swearing was radically changed! Never underestimate the word of God uttered out of the mouth of a youth.

In our studies in the Ten Commandments, I want to say three introductory words, concerning their structure, focus, and application.

### (a) Their Structure

The first four commandments are addressed to God (they instruct us how to love God); and the last six are addressed to man (they instruct us how to love man); And they have a rationale stated to provide a motivation behind the commandment, while the last six do not. According to my friend, Dr. Bruce Waltke, this is because the first four commandments were unique in the Ancient Near East, while the remaining six were found in other Ancient Near Eastern law codes.

### (b) Their Focus: Outward not Inward

The United States Constitution states that all citizens have certain inalienable rights. This notion is gathered up in the phrase, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Society today has assessed those words as a singular focus to protect rights, while at the same time it feels no responsibility to care for the rights of others. So we hear people say things like, "This is a free country. I can do what I please. It doesn't matter whose rights I infringe upon in the process."

The Ten Commandments take the opposite point of view. They hold that we are entrusted with certain inalienable responsibilities both to God and our neighbor. The commandments, "You shall not murder...commit adultery...steal...bear false witness..." imply that all men have a right to life, home, possessions, and their reputation, but the focus is on man's responsibility to not cross these sacred boundaries.

The grammatical form of the commandments emphasizes how serious God is about this. There are two ways to express a prohibition in Hebrew, and each uses a dif-

ferent tense and a different article of negation. The form used here is the most emphatic. It "corresponds to our Thou shalt not do it! with the strongest expectation of obedience."<sup>1</sup> What this tells us is that we become fully human when we take responsibility to care for others. So the focus of the Ten Commandments is outward, not inward.

### (c) Their Application

Though it is stated in the form of the negative, "You shall not...", each commandment is given a positive application in Deuteronomy. Thus, to rightfully fulfill these words we must be actively loving toward God and our neighbor. Jesus himself summarized the commandments in Matthew's gospel, when he said, "You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt 22:37-39, NASB).

Thus the nature of spirituality begins with a "no," followed by a "yes." The no's create sacred boundaries that must never be crossed. The holy boundaries having been established, we are then to set our focus to cultivate life in loving others. The metaphor can be applied to landscaping. If you want to create a beautiful garden, first you must engage in the toilsome work of clearing the land of weeds and rocks and establishing boundaries. Only then can you begin to plant the flowers and shrubs that will beautify the garden. Deuteronomy says that it is not enough merely not to steal. That does not fulfill the commandment. We have to work hard, making more money than we need, so we can care for others, providing for the orphan, the widow and the alien. (These first three commandments will find their positive application in Deut 6:4-11.)

Now we come to God's first commandment to Israel.

## I. The First Word: Guarding Our Affections Against Idolatry (Deut 5:6-7)

**"I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. You shall not have for yourself another god in preference to me."**

### (a) The basis for the Commandment

The first word begins with an emphatic "I." It describes the act of salvation by which the Lord delivered

Israel from the house of slavery. The first word God speaks to the heart is a word of love. Love is always demonstrated by God through his saving acts, which are imbedded in history. Israel's motivation to love God stems from the fact that he first loved Israel by saving her. In spirituality, grace precedes law, and obedience is always to be rooted in appreciation.

**(b) The first word stated in the negative**

"You shall not have for yourself another god in preference to me." Literally, the word says, "before my face."<sup>2</sup> This expression may be a reference to setting up an idol in the temple area right in Yahweh's presence. This is what Manasseh had the audacity to do (2 Kgs 21:7). Like any righteous husband who is zealous for his wife, Yahweh has absolutely no tolerance for other gods; therefore he warns Israel to guard her affections carefully.

**(c) The first word applied in the positive: Deut. 6:4-5**

"Hear O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is One! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Oxford scholar Tom Wright sees this text as stating two great foundational doctrines of Judaism, namely, monotheism and election: "There is one God, and Israel is His people" (one God and one people of God). The expression that the Lord is one means there is no internal division in Him, He is a God of integrity.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, God demands to be loved with the whole heart, in return.

Israel found this a difficult assignment. Even in response to God's grace, the nation failed to give her whole heart to him. Every time God turned to love Israel, she responded by turning away. But the prophet Jeremiah looked forward to a day when God would make a new covenant in Israel, such that the nation would love him with the whole heart: "And they shall be My people, and I will be their God; and I will give them *one heart* and *one way*...And I will make an everlasting covenant with them...and I will faithfully plant them in this land with *all My heart* and with *all My soul*" (Jer 32:38-41).

Jesus was the inaugurator of this new covenant. He took on man's role to love God with his whole heart. God, by the Holy Spirit, places believers in Christ so we can love him with a whole heart. This is what the New Testament is referring to when it says we have been "sealed" by the Holy Spirit. No matter how far we drift away, God always pursues us and woos us back so that he can be loved with the whole heart.

The hymn puts this beautifully:

*O to grace, how great a debtor,  
Daily I'm constrained to be.  
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,  
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.  
Prone to wander, Lord I feel it,*

*Prone to leave the one I love,  
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,  
Seal it for Thy courts above!*

In Christ, therefore, our hearts have been sealed by the Holy Spirit so that we can love God with our whole hearts.

So the first commandment deals with the affections of the heart.

The second commandment deals with the actions of our hands.

**II. The Second Word: Guarding Our Actions  
Against Idolatry (Deut 5:8-10)**

**(a) The prohibition against idolatry**

**"You shall not make for yourself an image of any likeness of that which is of the heavens above, or that which is on the earth beneath, or that which is in the waters under the earth."**

Orthodox Jews take this text to mean "an image *or* any likeness." They hold that this commandment prohibits all image making, i.e. that it is a proscription against all art—even photography. While that interpretation is possible grammatically, we must remember that in Exodus, God commanded the making of images from the creation to be placed in the tabernacle. Thus it is better to read the text as "an image of any likeness," thereby interpreting the commandment as a prohibition against the making of images specifically for idolatry.

We know that the land of Canaan was replete with idols. That entire society was given over to the manufacture and sale of images for worship. The foundational belief in the Ancient Near East was that the gods held the keys to life, and what drove them was sex. People believed the notion that if they could capture the image of the god in stone, they would possess the life of the god and could manipulate it to their own ends. The thrust of that kind of system of belief is that it is up to man to initiate and manufacture life. What a tremendous burden to carry!

Things have changed very little in our day. When I was in Malaysia, I noticed a little statue outside my hotel bedroom door, with a dish of food left there to feed the idol. How absurd, I thought to myself, that people made an image and then fed it in a futile attempt to gain life. But America, our own nation, is the most idolatrous nation on earth! Whole industries and technologies are given over to image making so that we might find life in idols. We are "hard-wired" for idolatry! But God says we must not enter into this process.

The reason is, idolatry is dangerous.

**(b) The dangers of idolatry**

**"You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons and upon the**

**third and fourth generations to those hating me, but showing (literally: doing) loyal-love to the thousandth generation to those loving me and to those keeping my commandments.”**

### **1. On the individual: An escalation of enslavement**

Idols are not static objects that we can control within fixed boundaries. The escalation of the activity of idols can be seen by the verbs used in the text. We think we can control the idol, set up boundaries and worship it in the privacy of our own hearts—when we are offstage, when its late and dark, and we are alone. But the idol gains entrance into the recesses of our hearts and feeds the affections. Our appetite becomes enlarged and it begins to impact our actions. We actually become involved in the idol-making process. We give it worth, something that is reserved only for God (we “bow down”); then we serve the idol (it consumes us night and day). At last we awaken to find our idol has consumed us and we are addicted to it.

### **2. On future generations: The perversions escalate**

But not only does the idol affect the individual, it impacts future generations. Idolatry is very contagious; its perversions escalate from one generation to the next. This is what happened in the Ancient Near East, where the goddess Asherah was worshipped. Altars erected on the high places were surrounded by naked female images carved on poles. The thinking of that generation was that the gods needed to be incited by lust. The next generation had as their sex goddess Astarte, the goddess of war. She is depicted naked, riding into battle on horseback, blood flowing up to her knees, with decapitated heads of men tied around her waist. Following the battle, she goes into her powder room and, according to the text, cleanses her hands. Remarkably, she “feels nothing.” The first generation arouses life through lust, but the second generation creates life through violence, and creates a society whose hearts are so hardened they are incapable of feeling emotions.

This has application for us today. In the '50's, society opened the door to pornography, and the world was motivated through lust. People responded by saying it was harmless. Then my generation took out into the streets what the world was doing privately. But in today's movies, perverted or illicit sex is not enough. Now it always leads to pillage, rape, death, and souls that have no feelings.

The question is, what does God do in the face of all this? The text tells us, “God visits the iniquity (or guilt) of the fathers on the sons to the third and fourth generations.” The verb “to visit” has a wide range of meanings, from the passive notion of “watching with care, overseeing,” to a more active sense of stepping into an existing situation to bring about a great change for good or evil. Traditionally, the Jews applied this text in this more active sense, so much so they interpreted it to be equivalent to fatalism. Thus this word became a prov-

erb in Israel,

“The fathers eat the sour grapes,  
But the children's teeth are set on edge” (lit. become dull) (Ezek 18:2).

The fathers sin, but the children pay. It is consequential and inevitable. Fatalism rules the day, and God does not care. That is how our generation interprets the verse as well: the children are punished for the sins of the fathers.

But the prophet Ezekiel wrote an entire chapter of 32 verses to correct this erroneous view:

“What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel saying,

The fathers eat the sour grapes,

But the children's teeth are set on edge?

As I live, declares the Lord God, “you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore. Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die” (Ezek 18:2-3).

Ezekiel then describes a scenario of several generations of sons. The first involves a righteous man who lives because of his righteousness. Yet, says Ezekiel, through no fault of his own, he has a violent son who soon breaks all the commandments. That son is an idol worshipper who oppresses the poor and takes bribes. Ezekiel says that this man will die for his own sins. Yet he in turn may have a son who witnessed all the violent and idolatrous deeds of his father, but chooses to break the cycle. He repents, and loves God with his whole heart. This son will not pay for his father's sins. We are absolutely responsible for our own sins, no matter what kind of upbringing we had.

The consistent attitude that God displays is one of care: “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked. I hold out repentance to every individual in every generation, so none has to die.” Idolatry is dangerous. If you choose to embrace it, God will allow you to have your idol (cf. Rom 1:18ff). He will watch in pain, waiting for you to repent. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He holds out repentance to every generation.

This commandment is not teaching fatalism, or that God does not care. Rather, it teaches that God is so caring he is constantly “watching” from heaven as the idolatry is passed like a contagious disease from one generation to the next. (This view is supported by Exodus 34:12-16<sup>4</sup>). As it grows, God attempts to get the attention of the fathers to repent, because he is zealous for us. At any time they can break the cycle. If no one does, God is still gracious. He will intervene in the fourth generation to cut off the effect of idolatry. Why? Because the grandfather is dead by this time, and the chance for him to repent has passed.

### **(c) The impact of God's loyal-love**

Yet, by contrast, if the father is faithful to do right-

eousness in the home, God rewards with an infinite blessing: “He does loyal-love for a thousand generations. The verb “to do” or “make” frames the commandment: If we are faithful to *not make* idols, God will do (*make*) loyal-love for a thousand generations.” We are required to do little, while God is willing to do so much. Instead of endangering your children and grandchildren with idolatry, teach them the commandments (the positive application in Deut 6:6-7). Fear motivates us to purge our homes of idols, but love prompts us to teach our children. God invites us to be part of something infinitely bigger than a puny idol. If we accept his invitation, the impact of our choice will go on forever.

So we are to guard our hearts against idolatry, and guard our actions.

Finally, we are to guard our speech.

### III. The Third Word: Guarding Our Speech Against Idolatry (Deut 5:11)

**“You shall not lift up (in an oath) the name of Yahweh your God unto vanity, for Yahweh shall not leave him unpunished who lifts his name unto vanity.”**

The word “vanity” means that which is empty, groundless and worthless. The word became a designation for idols. Attaching God’s holy name to a worthless cause, therefore, is equivalent to idolatry. This would involve lying under oath, false visions (for instance, saying that the Lord has healed someone when it is mere “positive thinking” versus the authentic word of the Lord), swearing, or even the more common use God’s name to back something you have a personal interest in, even if it is a good cause. Do not say that the Lord has led you to do something when it is merely personal ambition. In Matthew 5:33-37, Jesus said to not use God’s name in an oath, because we don’t know if we’ll even be around tomorrow.

If we violate the second commandment, God “visits the iniquity upon the sons,” but if we violate this commandment, God pays us back to our face! God is very zealous for his holy name. This was his word to the false prophets of Ezekiel’s day: “So My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations. They will have no place in the council of My people, nor will they be written down in the register of the house of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel, that you may know that I am the Lord GOD. It is definitely because they have misled My people by saying, ‘Peace!’ when there is no peace” (Ezek 13:9-10).

King Saul is another example of one who took the Lord’s name in vain. Twice he said of David, even while he was planning his death, “As the Lord lives, he shall not die!” Worse yet, he uttered an oath to a witch that she would live, contrary to what God had spoken.

After that seedy encounter with the witch of Endor, the very next day, God paid Saul back to his face. He met his bloody end on the hill of Gilboa, his body beheaded, dismembered and desecrated in a Philistine temple.

Instead of desecrating and profaning the name of God, what we should do is place his holy name in the community by evangelizing (“write these words on the doorposts of your city gates,” Deut 6:9). So let us lift up the standard of these Ten Words in the world. When we do this, we will have a sense of holiness and life.

So let us not take God’s name in vain, but rather, let us take his name into the community and evangelize.

God has not left us without answers as to how he wants to be loved. He desires to be loved wholeheartedly (with the whole heart); in purity (with no idols); and in holiness (giving his name due honor). Despite our sin and waywardness, he keeps on winning. He breaks in again and again to render powerless the perversions of sin passed on from one generation to the next; then he faithfully woos us back when we wander, until love seals our hearts. What wondrous love is this!

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<sup>1</sup> E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, Translated by A. E. Cowly, 2nd Edition, Oxford, 1910, pg. 317

<sup>2</sup> The prepositional phrase, “before me” has a wide range of meanings, as Brevard Childs shows in his commentary of Exodus: “A wide variety of translations have suggested in addition to the traditional rendering ‘beside me’ in the AV: ‘in defiance of me’, ‘to my disadvantage’, ‘over against me’... The preposition has such a wide use that almost every suggested translation can find some biblical warrant. Even the translation of Rashi, ‘so long as I exist’, which at first sight appears completely arbitrary, has striking support in such verses as Num. 3.4. The fact that the preposition can often carry a hostile tone (Gen. 16.12) has been noted in several of the renderings. Some commentators continue to stress the literal meaning ‘before my face’ as providing the original setting which prohibited setting up idols in the presence of Yahweh. Perhaps the somewhat neutral rendering ‘before me’ remains the most useful one in light of the above difficulties.” (Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, Old Testament Library, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974, 402-403).

<sup>3</sup> See the excellent article on the meaning of this phrase “one” in *Theology Today*, Vol. 1.

<sup>4</sup> “Watch yourself that you make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land into which you are going, lest it become a snare in your midst. But rather, you are to tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and cut down their Asherim—for you shall not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God—lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they play the harlot with their gods, and sacrifice to their gods, and someone invite you to eat of his sacrifice; and you take some of his daughters for you sons, and his daughters play the harlot with their gods, and cause your sons also to play the harlot with their gods” (Exod 34:12-16).





# SABBATH: GOD'S PROVISION FOR REST

SERIES: RESTORING THE ANCIENT BOUNDARIES

Catalog No. 1001

Exodus 20:8-11

Third Message

Andrew Drake

July 9, 1995

I have been working with teenagers for more than ten years, yet I am always amazed at how busy they are with school, jobs, homework, extra-curricular activities, year round sports and summer school.

But this hectic and exhausting lifestyle is not limited to teenagers. Although there is an entire industry devoted to leisure today, adults—parents, in particular—live extremely busy lives.

In an article in the *San Jose Mercury News* a few months ago, Michael Ventura described the plight of busy parents. Perhaps you can relate to this:

Today, parents' lives are a frantic maze of chores as they clean, shop, cook, and ferry the kids, often while working full or part time. Breadwinners wake early, commute in traffic, work at jobs whose rhythms are determined by others, and commute back home, exhausted and distracted, to an equally fatigued and distracted mate. Children rarely see either parent in a relaxed setting, and they find their daily lives run by school schedules and social pressures.

Is it any wonder young people are so busy? They are imitating the hectic and unexamined lives modeled by their parents.

Christians oftentimes are the worst offenders in this respect. The Scriptures encourage believers to be doers of the word and not just hearers (James 1:22). We respond by reaching out to the lost and the needy, attending worship services on Sundays, men's and women's morning Bible studies, home fellowships and youth staff meetings on week nights. We have morning devotionals; we teach children's Sunday School, attend retreats, workshops, choir practices, Noah's Place, Boys Brigade, and elders meetings. The list seems endless.

I think one reason we involve ourselves in so much activity is because we think that doing so will draw us into a more intimate relationship with God. We think all our strivings for God are the supreme expression of our love for him and for others. The fourth commandment, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy," however, is a reminder that an integral part of expressing love for God and for others is ceasing all of our activities and entering into sabbath rest.

The commandment to observe the sabbath is given both in Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5. I want to begin by reading Exodus 20:8-11, where the Ten Commandments were given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, three months after the Israelites had gone out of the land of

Egypt:

**"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or female servant, or your cattle, or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy."** (NASB)

The fourth commandment is one of only two that begin on a positive note: "Six days you shall labor..." (the other is, "Honor your father and mother..."). This positive commandment is then reinforced by the negative command, "on it you shall not do any work."

The reason behind a day of sabbath rest is found in the creation account. The sabbath is the seventh and final day of creation. On that day, "God rested from all his work which he had done" (Gen 2:3). Israel was to observe a day of rest because the Lord observed a day of rest. By his resting, God modeled for mankind the divine rhythm of work and rest.

The question that begs to be answered is, why did God rest? Was it because he was tired, hungry or thirsty? No, of course he wasn't. Let's dig a little deeper into the text to see if we can discover why God rested.

The first clue comes from the meaning of the words "sabbath" and "rest." The Hebrew word for "sabbath" means "to stop, to cease from work"; and the Hebrew word for "rest" conveys, not the thought of idleness, but rather, peacefulness, and the joy and satisfaction that comes from completing a work. On the seventh day God stopped his creative work. He rested because his work was complete.

Later in Exodus we read that the Lord himself told Israel that the sabbath was a day when he rested and was refreshed. It was also a day in which his people and their animals were to be refreshed when they rested. In Hebrew, the word for "refresh" means to "take a breath." The word is used in 2 Samuel 16 of David, who "refreshed" himself at the end of his weary travels. The picture conveyed is of finding a place to rest at the top of the mountain and reveling in the joy and satisfaction of completing an arduous climb, reflecting on the beautiful scenery, and taking an exhilarating breath of fresh air.

A second clue for explaining the purpose of God's rest is that it was a day of blessing. The word "blessing" is used in Genesis 2 in reference to humans and animals, "to confer abundant and effective life." So the sabbath was to be a day of blessing, a day intended to help man live an abundant and effective life.

A third clue is that the sabbath is a "holy" day. The Hebrew word for "holy" means "to set something apart and dedicate it to God for his use." The prophet Isaiah defined true sabbath-keeping as turning from one's own ways and pleasures and taking delight in the LORD: "If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your own pleasure on My holy day, and call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, and shall honor it, desisting from your own ways, from seeking your own pleasure, and speaking your own word, then you will take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth" (Isa 58:13-14a).

The people of Israel were not to profane the sabbath by filling it with secular affairs. Rather, they were to celebrate the day in gatherings for holy worship and loving fellowship.

Not only was the day itself holy but, according to Exodus 31, the sabbath was a sign that Israel itself was made holy by the LORD. Observing the Sabbath was a witness for Israel and for other nations that Israel had entered into a covenant with the Creator. By resting on the sabbath, the nation distinguished themselves as a holy people—a people set apart and dedicated to Yahweh.

Just as the rainbow is the sign of God's grace, and circumcision is the sign of Abraham's faith, so too, the sabbath is a sign: it is a sign of God's provision for man's rest. God works for man, so that man can rest in God's provision.

Further, the people of Israel were commanded to rest on the sabbath not just when it was convenient but, as we read in Exodus 34, even during the critical plowing and harvest seasons. This was a recognition that all the products of their work were a gift from God. The observance of the Sabbath by Israel was an obvious sign of their faith and trust in God's provision for them.

Here we must ask ourselves, do our schedules reflect trust and faith in God? Just like with Israel, our rhythm of work and rest can be a good indicator not only of our trust and faith in God, but also our motives. Are we secure in the provision and leading of God, or are our actions motivated by self-preservation? Is it our faith in God and our love for others that keeps us so busy in ministry, or is it our lack of faith and our fear that God will not be able to accomplish his will without our help? Is it love for our families that keeps us busy, or is it the love of money? Are we really working hard to support our families, or are we working to support a materialistic lifestyle?

The second expression for why and how Israel was to observe the Sabbath commandment is given in Deut 5:12-15. Here the commandments were repeated by Moses to Israel before they were to enter into the land of Canaan:

**"Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. And you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day."**

There are two things I would like to highlight in this text that are unique. First, there is more of an emphasis on the community aspect of God's provision to rest. The people were all so interconnected, if they did not rest, others could not rest. Their rhythm of work and rest affected the rhythm of servants, animals, and even strangers. Israel's rest was to be a contagious thing.

Second, in this text the Israelites are called to remember, not the mighty acts of God at creation, but his mighty acts in delivering them from Egypt. Israel's ancestors in Egypt were treated worse than mules. The captives slaved away for four hundred years without a day of rest. But the LORD intervened and with a mighty hand, restored them not only as a nation, but as men and women who possessed freedom and dignity.

Some of us are slaves to our jobs. And this slavery, this rhythm of work without rest, has a harmful impact on others. Consider this Yiddish song, "My Little One," sung by a father to his sleeping child:

I have a son, a little son, a boy completely fine.  
When I see him it seems to me that all the world is mine.  
But seldom, seldom do I see my child awake and bright;  
I only see him when he sleeps; I'm only home at night.  
It's early when I leave for work; When I return it's late.  
Unknown to me is my own flesh, unknown is my child's face.  
When I come home so wearily in the darkness after day,  
My wife exclaims to me: 'You should have seen our child play.'  
I stand beside his little bed, I look and try to hear.  
In his dream he moves his lips: 'Why isn't Papa here?'

So in both the Exodus and Deuteronomy accounts of

the Ten Commandments, the sabbath was instituted by God himself as a provision of rest for Israel. It was a day of blessing in which the people of Israel were refreshed by ceasing from all their labors; a day to take delight in Yahweh by remembering his creative and redemptive works on their behalf. The sabbath was also a sign that they were a people set apart for God and that their trust and faith was to be in him alone.

By Jesus' time, the true meaning of the sabbath had been obscured. The scribes had developed an elaborate code of regulations and restrictions governing sabbath observance to keep Jews from inadvertently transgressing the commandment. Sabbath observance had become such a burden that people were not rested or refreshed by it at all.

But Jesus recovered the true meaning of the sabbath. His primary concern was not to ridicule or eliminate the laws of Moses, but to demonstrate their true importance and restore them to their true intention. The brunt of Jesus' criticisms toward the religious leaders of his day, was that they had cut the heart out of the law by their weighty additions to the written code.

For example, Jesus, in his confrontation with the Pharisees concerning the observance of the sabbath, had to remind them that "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Through their absurd requirements, the rabbis were changing the sabbath into a cruel tyrant, and man into its slave. Jesus had to remind them that man was created first, and then the sabbath. The sabbath was instituted to be a blessing, not a burden for man.

Not only did Jesus restore the meaning of the sabbath, he fulfilled its purpose and took it to a far deeper level. He says in the gospel of Matthew, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls" (Matt 11:28-29).

Then in the Upper Room, Jesus said that the pouring out of his blood on the cross would establish a new covenant. When the old covenant is done away with, so, too, is the sign. The sabbath, as a sign of the old covenant, is replaced by a new sign, the breaking of bread and taking of wine. From that point on it was the creative and redemptive acts of Jesus that the disciples should recall. They were to remember that in Christ they had become a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), and that they had been liberated by Jesus, not from the bondage of Egypt, but from the bondage of sin (Romans 6). They were to look forward to the day when they would celebrate a grand feast and find ultimate rest with him in heaven. Sabbath rest was found not in a particular day, but in a particular Person.

That is why the apostle Paul can say in Colossians 2:16-17: "Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new

moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ." Paul is saying that the sabbath, along with the remainder of the Jewish ceremonial system, has been fulfilled in Christ. The rest we find in Jesus is a fuller and deeper reality than the rest of the sabbath. Thus the law, with its regulations concerning foods and feasts, foreshadowed something far greater—the salvation and rest that is found in Jesus Christ. Keeping the sabbath is no more binding on Christians than are the dietary laws.

The sabbath had served a real purpose, however. As a shadow of Christ, it provided a dim, yet descriptive outline of the rest to be found in him. But, says Paul, why cling to the shadow when the true substance has arrived? What justification could there be for imposing the observance of the sabbath, when the bringer of eternal rest is urging everyone to come to him? The seventh day of the week is no holier than any other day. Each day is special and holy because we are holy in Christ.

The author of Hebrews also picks up on the theme that Jesus is our true rest. In Hebrews 4:8-11a, the writer compares the superior rest of Jesus to the rest of Israel under Joshua: "For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest."

The eternal and secure spiritual rest that we find through faith in Jesus Christ is far superior to the temporal and elusive rest given to Israel under Joshua. Joshua led the Israelites into the land of promise, where they temporarily enjoyed rest and peace. But Jesus, having completed his work of redemption on the cross, now rests at the right hand of the Father, and he grants eternal sabbath rest to those who enter into a saving relationship with him.

Does this mean that Christians no longer need to take time out for sabbath rest? On the contrary, because every day is holy for Christians, we have tended to observe no day as holy, therefore we especially need to take time out to be refreshed by God. Most of us have been fooled into thinking that by its very nature, a day off is a sabbath. But merely because we are not working does not mean we are resting. Sitting in front of a television for hours on end is rarely refreshing.

Gordon MacDonald hits the nail on the head when he says, "Sabbath rest penetrates to the deepest levels of fatigue in the inner, private world. This fatigue is rarely touched by any of the modern amusements...Leisure and amusement may be enjoyable, but they are to the private world of the individual like cotton candy to the digestive system. They provide a momentary lift, but they will not last."

It is true that the internal and eternal spiritual rest we have in Jesus Christ is ours no matter what our rhythm

of work and rest is like. It is also true that we are freed from having to set aside any particular day to rest. But if we look at the life of Jesus, it is clear that setting aside consistent times to be in the presence of God is crucial in staying refreshed.

When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, he did not begin by saying, "Love your neighbor as yourself." He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." Fostering that kind of intimacy with God requires unhurried times of quiet reflection.

Activity without reflection frustrates intimacy. But by reflecting on the work that God is doing in and through us, we are drawn closer to him, because we find eternal significance in all that we do.

Even though his days were filled with traveling, teaching and healing, Jesus took time to stop and pray to find strength and direction for his ministry. Taking time to stop and enter into sabbath rest does not come naturally for most of us, but sabbath taking is founded on the notion that we must stop. We cannot rest without stopping first. Being unable to stop is not a sign of godliness; it is a sign that we do not trust God.

We must learn that more important than being busy for God is being dependent upon him, and being sensitive and able to respond at a moment's notice to his calling. Busyness can be a distraction to godliness if we are too busy with our own agenda to respond to God's leading.

Jesus says, "if you abide in me you will bear much fruit" (John 15:5). The image of a godly man or woman in the New Testament is not someone who is always busy, but someone who is fruitful.

I must confess that over the last few weeks, my rhythm of work and rest has not been refreshing or fruitful. With my responsibilities pastoring the High School ministry, taking Hebrew at Western Seminary, trying to get some things done around the house before our baby is due, and preparing for this sermon, I have not often entered into sabbath rest. But God has been faithful in refreshing my spirit as I take a walk after work each day. During those times I find that I am able to reflect on my day and pray for those whom God brings to mind.

Even though Jesus was surrounded by distractions, whether he was on a mountain or in a garden, he could be refreshed by being alone with his Father. Finding a place of refuge can be difficult for us. It is hard to find a true place of refuge, a place away from the telephone, beeper, fax machine, computer, radio, or television.

As a pastor I find it is difficult to enter into a restful spirit on Sundays, so my wife Amy and I, together with our daughter Olivia, try to make Fridays a day of resto-



# DESERVING OF DEATH

*SERIES: RESTORING THE ANCIENT BOUNDARIES*

Catalog No. 1002  
Deuteronomy 5:16  
Fourth Message  
Steve DePangher  
July 23, 1995

It is my privilege to lead us in a study of the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and mother." I want to immediately establish that this commandment is applicable to us today: How many of you have a father or a mother? In a more serious vein, according to Biblical standards, how many of you deserve death or severe punishment for the way you have treated or perhaps are treating your parents? I will read selections from the Old Testament which will help us understand how serious it is to violate this commandment:

Exodus 21:15: **And he who strikes his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.** (NASB)

Leviticus 20:9: **If there is anyone who curses his father or his mother, he shall surely be put to death; he has cursed his father or his mother, his bloodguiltiness is upon him.**

Proverbs 20:20: **He who curses his father or his mother, his lamp will go out in time of darkness.**

Proverbs 19:26: **He who assaults his father and drives his mother away is a shameful and disgraceful son.**

Proverbs 30:17: **The eye that mocks a father, and scorns a mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it.**

Now let me tell you a story from my own life. I don't remember how old I was, maybe 13 or 14. I came home from somewhere and found my mom lying on the couch watching TV. The rest of the family was home too. I sat on the edge of the couch in front of my mom. I was moody, unhappy. I can't remember about what. Something stupid probably. Girls maybe. My mom, attempting probably just to reach out to me, started to tickle me a little and I didn't like it. I think I raised my voice a little at her to stop. But she thought I was just kidding and she kept tickling me. I spun around and hit my mother on the shoulder with my fist. Pretty hard. The Law of God says that I deserve death for that punch. And the law of God is right and good and just. I hold that moment in my mind as a landmark of my salvation. For I know that I deserve death.

So, I stand before you as one who has broken the fifth commandment. My guess is, though, that everyone here is as guilty as I am. Perhaps you have never physically struck your mother as I did. But you have "struck" your parents with disrespectful words, by not listening, by ignoring, by outright acts of disobedience and rebellion. But I also stand before you as one who has been redeemed from death by the grace of God. This redemption is open to you as well. So let us explore both the depth of our sin, and the even greater depths of God's love and forgiveness.

## The First Commandment with a Promise

I want to clear up one point before we begin: I will not be providing a satisfactory resolution of what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote that the fifth commandment "is the first commandment with a promise." Ephesians 6:1-3:

**Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and your mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth.**

What does Paul mean by that? I do not know for sure. I suspect there is a connection here between the importance of family life and the importance of the life of a society as a whole. Dave Roper has these thoughts on this topic:

Israel's prosperity in the land depended on [honoring parents]. The social order of any nation is affected by this command. If we don't heed it we never learn from preceding generations. We go on repeating our foolishness and digging ourselves in deeper until the nation disintegrates. We never seem to learn. Every generation has to start from scratch because we don't think the older generation has anything to say.

This sounds reasonable. But we cannot know for sure, since Paul does not give reasons for what he says.

But there is one other clue that indicates that Dave Roper might be right. In the closing verse of Deuteronomy 5, Moses has just finished reiterating the Ten Commandments, when he says,

**"You shall walk in all the way which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you shall possess"** (Deut. 5:33).

These words are almost identical to the words attached to the fifth commandment. Very similar words can be found in Deuteronomy 8:1; 11:2, 9. This leads me to conclude that the fifth commandment holds a special position in terms of quality or directness in application to the notion of long life in the land. In other words, it is clear that obedience to God's commandments, not just the commandment about honoring father and mother, will produce long life and success in the land. But obedience to parents will play a direct role in this dynamic. It is not hard to agree with Dave Roper and speculate that the whole notion of the importance of the family in society is here being designated as key to a society's success.

## Points to Remember

So now you know what this message will not be about. What then will it be? I will be satisfied if you leave with these points firmly in your hearts:

How crucial it is from God's point of view that we honor our parents, especially in the vulnerable years of their old age.

How it is up to the Christian son or daughter to seek out their parents and do them honor.

Understanding how honoring parents can be accomplished even when the parents were abusive and not worthy of honor.

Practical ideas about how to honor parents.

To accomplish this, we will quickly move through the biblical texts that help us understand this commandment, and then into areas of application. Unlike some biblical issues, the interpretive questions here are not particularly difficult, so we will be able to spend much of our time seeking to understand what this commandment means for us to day.

## Focused on the Family

The fifth commandment, that cornerstone of society's health, was given in the social world of the Ancient Near East. That society, like most societies before and since, was very family-focused. It is difficult for 20th century Americans to understand just how powerful a force the family was in society. To truly understand how to apply the fifth commandment to our lives today, we must seek to understand the power of the family back then—a power we feel only faintly in comparison in our day.

## A Tribal Society

First, let's examine Israel's national identity. You've probably heard it said that the Israelites of the Old Testament lived in a tribal society. Our society is not tribal, but national. Our national identity rests as much in where we live as in who we are. But it was not so with God's Chosen People. They were called the Nation of Israel because of Jacob, their forefather. Jacob had twelve sons, each of whom became the leader of families and clans. Individuals became part of the family either by descent or adoption. A study of the Old Testament to determine the national boundaries of Israel can be quite confusing. But it's not hard to determine who was an Israelite. In David's time, it is clear that tribal identity could overshadow the fact that all of the tribes were descended from Abraham. The tensions between the tribes of Benjamin, Saul's tribe, and Judah, David's tribe, form the basis for the separation of the nation of Israel into Southern and Northern Kingdoms.

## The Name of God

The Israelites even made their references to God based on their family connections. Occasionally, the Old Testament records the fact that God is God of a place. But more often than not, God is referred to as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Ultimately, when God's very character is not the basis for his name, he is not the God of Bethel or Jerusalem, nor is he the God of wonders and miracles. No. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God of the family. It would not be unreasonable to say that the Israelites were proud to say, "He is my daddy's God."

## Social Obligations and Institutions

In Israel, social obligations and institutions like marriage, work, and place of living were determined by one's immediate and extended family connections and history. For example, Isaac's marriage was arranged within the context of Abraham's extended family. Esau's marrying outside of his tribal associations vexed Abraham and Sarah. Such OT examples are numerous.

In terms of jobs or occupations, consider the influence of the family on, say, the Levites. If you were born into this tribe, you could not say that economic opportunities looked better with the Philistines, so you were going to learn the chariot-making trade. If you were a Levite, you were a priest. That was your job. You had a special calling, not because of any dramatic emotional-religious experience, but because of your father's name and birthright.

And, of course, if you were a Levite, you lived in one of the Cities of Refuge that were clearly established by Moses and Joshua before the Israelites conquered the land of Canaan. This was true of all the tribes. A lot fell to your tribe, and that was what determined your address. It is hard to conceive of this today. If we don't like living in Sunnyvale, we can move to Cupertino or San Mateo or Danville. Where the rest of our extended family lives is often of no concern to us.

Finally, in most ancient societies your birth family provided your home until you married and made your own home. There was very little sense of "going off on one's own" like we have today in the years traditionally associated with college and the beginning of one's career (approximately ages 18-25). And, interestingly, the shift in ancient society from one's birth family to one's marriage family did not mean the end of relations with the birth family. In fact, the temptation to simply stay at home was so powerful in ancient society that Moses had to warn the male leaders in Hebrew society against it: "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh." The men of Moses' time were all too likely to simply subsume the new relationship of husband into their old relationship as son. So the pull of the family was powerful and omnipresent in ancient society.

## Honor in the Family

So we have established that family was vastly more influential in the Ancient Near East than it is in modern America. But how were parents honored in that day? Most of us have a good idea of what honoring parents involves. I was taught that it meant loving them and obeying them as long as I lived under their roof. After I moved, obedience did not remain a requirement, but love, and a sense of respect for them, did.

If that is your concept, you are actually not too far from the truth. The Hebrew word for honor, *kabad*, literally and originally meant "to be heavy, weighty or burdensome." "Honor" or "glorify," the two words which the NASB most often uses to translate *kabad*, were added later. One source indicates that the idea of honor arose because of its notion of severity of impact. Whatever it is that can cause such a heavy burden or weight ought to be treated with a certain respect, awe, or fear. We may have an English comparison. We call an important topic, one worthy of careful attention and concern, a "weighty matter." Also, we say someone is a "heavyweight" in something if they are really good at it; therefore, they command our admiration, respect, or honor.

Sometimes, however, words that are familiar to us can lose their power and poignancy. So I did an experiment with every occurrence of *kabad* in the OT. As I read every passage in which the word was used, I asked myself the question, What actions or thoughts is the writer assuming when he says that *kabad* is present? For example, Numbers 22 uses the word frequently to describe what Balak promised to Balaam if he would curse the Israelites: "I will indeed honor you richly, and I will do whatever you say to me," promised Balak. There, *kabad* implies to reward, probably in the form of monetary payment and public recognition.

Here is what I found *kabad* implies is some of its other OT uses:

- to give private or public praise in remembrance of, perhaps even to worship
- to give appropriate sacrifice to and recognition of
- to hold someone in respect and even in awe for their position or abilities
- to publicly express value for the position of someone—even when their behavior has (privately) been faulty
- to recognize the significance of
- to give financially to and in support of
- to value significantly; to prize
- going beyond lip service, to have one's heart close to someone
- to obey, seek the good of and true significance of, to respond to someone with sincere respect
- to seek out for recognition
- to thank

Powerful stuff. But a word of caution is necessary. In the OT, God is revered as the recipient of man's honor. God is eminently worthy of honor and glory; our parents must stand a little lower in our affections and recognition. But even with this caution, it is clear that the OT authors regard showing honor as being more significant than the distant love and respect that we think we can get by on with our parents today.

## Honoring Parents in the New Testament

### Jesus

Jesus recognized two important truths with respect to honoring parents. First, he challenged the religious status quo of his day when it came to caring for parents in their time of need. On one occasion, the Pharisees complained to Jesus that his disciples did not wash their hands before they ate. In other words, they failed to perform the proper ceremonial prescribed by the oral tradition that had grown up around the Law of Moses. Jesus' response was to lay into the Pharisees for how they had abandoned the Law of God through the institution of petty legalisms into the oral tradition. They taught that giving money or food to the service of the temple exempted children from supporting their parents, even if the parents had need for some of that money or food.

Today, we should think in terms of how we spend our time, because today we use money to try to buy time. Do we let our own religious activities, our "churchiness," prevent us from spending the time we should spend with our parents? We get so involved with choir practice, elders meetings, Boys' Brigade, Noah's Place, and so on, that we often have no time left over for spending time with our parents. Are we as a church guilty of the same sin as the Pharisees? Do we encourage life structures and habits that imply that spending time in so-called Christian "activity" is more important than spending time honoring our parents?

If thinking about this question creates tension for you, then you are in the right place. Christians are especially prone to "busy-ness," in part because God has given us two families—the human family in which we live, and the Family of God, the Church. Let's look at both Jesus' and Paul's experience of this dilemma, and their instructions for resolving it.

Jesus made sure we understand that something greater than our physical families has come with the creation of his Church. Once, Jesus' family sent a messenger to him while he was teaching, to say they wanted to see him. Listen to his response:

**"Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand towards his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother." (Matt. 12:48-50)**

Jesus is saying that even though our physical families are important, there is something even more important. God did not create the family unit merely to be a spawning ground for future generations, no matter how well these generations might be raised. Rather, our physical families are to serve as a training ground for our work in the Kingdom of God. And if that terrible moment ever comes (and it comes far less often than we think) when there is a conflict between the honor we owe to God and the honor we owe to our parents, then the demands of the kingdom of heaven must take precedence.

Before we leave this passage, though, we must remember that the one who is speaking is Jesus. Jesus did say these words, but in his dying moments he made sure that John would care for his mother. So, Jesus experienced the full range of feelings for his physical family. He spoke boldly against the legalistic religiosity of the Pharisees and how it laid waste the command of God to honor our parents; on the other hand he made it

clear that there is a higher priority for us in life than our physical families.

### **Paul**

Paul felt some of the same tension as Jesus. While we know almost nothing about Paul's physical family, his word about one practical way we are to honor our parents could hardly be clearer. In 1 Timothy 5:3-8, the apostle is instructing Timothy in how he should interact with the elderly members of his congregation. Then he takes up the subject of widows, and says,

**Honor widows who are widows indeed; but if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family, and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God.** [Then, after giving some qualifications for widowhood, he writes:] **But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever.**

Here Paul makes it clear that the commandment to honor one's father and mother should be applied, in some sense, beyond the nuclear, to the extended family. When he writes that we are to provide for our own, especially our own household, he is saying that we are to care for the family unit beyond the immediate household, making sure to keep the immediate household the top priority. There are few places in Scripture where the condemnation of the sinner is more dramatically stated than Paul states it here: to fail to honor your father and mother is to deny your faith, and makes you worse than an unbeliever.

### **Honoring Parents Today**

What does the commandment mean to us today? As is always the case, the teachings of the Scriptures are timeless. How many of us face the same tension that Jesus and Paul faced? How many of us feel that our faith has led us into commitments that make it hard to find the time to honor our parents? How many of us are trying to find ways to honor parents who do not seem worthy of honor? Let's look at how the teaching of the Bible on honoring our parents can be applied to our lives today.

First, let us recap what we have covered. I hope by now you have seen how significant an issue it is for us to honor our parents. The Biblical teaching is that honor consists of actively seeking out and publicly recognizing the value and worth of our parents. It implies that we will be thanking, prizing, supporting, and communicating with them. The NT especially reveals how we must be ever vigilant to ensure that our religious activities are not preventing us from honoring our parents. These things are not difficult to understand; it is simply that they are hard to do. Yet do them we must, not because we must fulfill the law to win acceptance from God, but because we love and honor our truest Father. 1 John 5:3 says, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome."

As I have reflected on this commandment over the last several months, I have come to believe that we fail as a society and as individuals in many ways in our attempts to respond to God's standard about honoring our parents. Let me share some of my observations with you:

### **The "Abortion" of the Elderly**

One of the great crimes of modern America is the way the elderly are treated by their children. What do I mean? Just like we abort millions of babies and do not weep (in fact, we justify this atrocity under the wicked and willful name of "choice"), in the same way, we ignore to death our grandparents, great-grandparents, great-aunts, great-uncles, and so on. We create places to store them so that we do not have to think too much about them or their care.

I do not want to be offensive, but I do want to be clear. We live in an age in which money acts as a substitute for time and commitment. Whenever we buy a service, essentially what we are buying is the time to do other things that we prefer to do. Homes for the elderly are another such service. In and of themselves, they are morally neutral. If it is best that your parents live in one of these facilities, then so be it. But for whom is it best? Is it best for you or for them? Answering this question is not easy. No one can answer it for us. But I challenge you to look at your own situation honestly.

When Wayne Rice was here several months ago, he shared a statistic that I found fascinating. According to 1940 census data, 76% of American households had at least one non-nuclear family member living in the home. Three-fourths of all American grandparents lived in the homes of one of their children. But the 1980 census revealed that the number of households with even one non-nuclear family member had dropped to slightly less than 2%! In a single generation, Americans have terminated

the whole concept of the extended family. Today, private businesses, but more especially the government, are anxious to take up the burden of caring for our parents for us. It seems we are only too willing to let them do so.

What price we will pay for these decisions remains to be seen. But these kinds of changes do not happen in a society without consequences that are deep and lasting. Wayne Rice believes that by eliminating the presence of another adult in the home, we take away a buffer that both children and parents can benefit from. By a "buffer," Wayne is referring to the calming, mitigating effect of having another loved and trusted member of the family living in the home. Parents can seek wisdom from this family member in training their children; and children can hear the respected voice of another adult at moments when it is too emotionally hard for them to "hear" the voice of their own parents. And finally, the sense of a family's history and tradition is given a stabilizing, physical presence in the home. But all of this is gone for us. We have chosen to isolate ourselves as little, limited nuclear families.

One final word on this issue of children abandoning their parents. In ancient times, abortion mainly involved abandoning a newborn in some lonely, desolate place. I fear that today we are doing the same thing to our parents—except that the area is no longer desolate. I am not saying that placing one of your parents into a home care facility is wrong. But if you do it to avoid the commitment of time and energy that might be required of you, then I ask you to rethink what you are doing.

### **Honoring is Active**

Some of you may be thinking, "But my parents don't want the kind of attention and care that you are suggesting. They don't want such involvement in their lives by me or any of their offspring." That may be true. My challenge to you today is to be aggressive in finding out whether it is true or not.

I came across an intriguing verse while I was studying this topic. Psalm 86:9 tightly links the notions of worship and honor which we owe to God the Father. This psalm depicts that wonderful time when all the nations that God has made will come and worship him:

**All nations whom Thou hast made shall come and worship before Thee, O Lord;  
And they shall glorify Thy name.**

"Come and worship," it says. And the content of that worship is expressed in one word, *kabad*, the word which the fifth commandment uses for honor. Here it is translated "glorify." What I want us to notice is the movement in this psalm: "come and worship." The movement is by the one who desires to give honor to another—in this case God. Is not the same true for us when we would honor our parents? Do we not have to seek them out, find them, speak to them, spend time with them? Honoring is not a passive, but an active thing. That is all I want you to see when it comes to determining how you can best care for your parents. Seek them out. Get to know them again. Make your care decisions based on the sure foundation of a relationship of open communication.

### **Finding Honor in the Midst of Death**

Once again, some of you are probably saying, "That is all fine and good for situations in which things are relatively normal. But my situation is not normal. What about abusive situations which have resulted in emotional devastation and psychological separation between parents and children?" David himself may have felt this way. When Samuel came to anoint the new king, Jesse didn't even invite David to the family dinner. Later in his life, in Psalm 27, David wrote:

**Thou has been my help;  
Do not abandon me nor forsake me,  
O God of my salvation!  
For my father and my mother have forsaken me,  
But the Lord will take me up.** (Ps. 27:9b-10)

And what about circumstances of divorce and remarriage, which put children in the seemingly impossible situation of honoring multiple sets of parents?

I cannot speak to all such situations at once. God has created a different story for each one of us, and these traumatic and often tragic chapters in his story for us have circumstances which will be uniquely redeemed. But I can say that in the last several years I have become increasingly and painfully aware of how tragic are the lives of many families. I would go so far as to say that every family has something or someone in its closet which would be the cause of great pain and embarrassment if brought to light. Deep psychological problems, like abuse, suicide, drug addiction and violence, lie behind the smiling faces in every family's photo album.

Can we say that God did not know of such things when he wrote the fifth commandment on the tablet of stone with his very own finger? Is he too small for such pain? What do you think it was like for God the Father when the sins of the whole world, including the ones hiding in each of our families, were heaped upon his Son on the cross? He is a God who knows and cares about these things. He did not create limitations on the fifth commandment. It may well be that reconciliation between abusive parents and abused children will not occur in this lifetime, but that does not mean that prayers for such reconciliation cease, or that active love comes to an end.

Every once in a while, I hear Christians say something that indicates they think life ought to be "fair." It's not, of course. One thing that is clear in Scripture is that deeply committed Christians are promised one thing in this life, and that is suffering. It is in the crucible of suffering that God will make us into who he wants us to be.

In the area of relations with our parents, let me tell you a story that is anything but "fair" concerning someone whom I know personally.

The woman I am thinking of had parents who lived about 200 miles from her and her family. Her parents were in their 80's, and they had been married for 63 years when the wife died. They had lived full, healthy, and, by almost anyone's standards, good, moral, Christian lives. After the death of this woman's mother, the father, who had lost his helpmeet of more than 63 years, was never quite the same. The woman drove for nearly eight hours at least once a month or whenever she had the chance to visit her father. She knew he was not happy. She made sure he was well cared for and she did everything she could for him when she visited. He didn't want to go into a "home," because deep down he considered that an affront to his dignity— although that would have made things a lot easier for his daughter. But she never said anything; she did not complain. She continued to live her life with her own family and then make that drive on the weekends, or as other occasions permitted. This went on for years. One day her father decided he had had enough. He didn't call and talk to his devoted daughter; he didn't make any plea for his condition; he didn't communicate at all. He simply went out into the orchard behind his house and, at age 92, shot himself in the head with a rifle, and died instantly.

Was this fair to his daughter? Did she deserve this for her hours and years of patient honoring? Of course not. But this is the stuff that life is made of. These kinds of fiery trials are exactly the kinds of character-building experiences that God uses to mold us into his servants while we are in this life. If the Son of Man had to pass through the agony of the cross, feeling in full the desolation of being abandoned in that moment by a Holy Father, then the way is open to us to endure (I do not say enjoy or be happy about) these life experiences. From death comes redemption.

### **The Tribute**

Before closing, I would like to suggest some practical ways in which you can do honor to your parents. I have challenged you to rethink your care for them. I have sought to broaden your understanding of what it means to honor them. I have encouraged you to seek them out and communicate with them. In those terrible cases which make direct communication impossible, I encourage you to pray for them every day. And we have heard the words of both Paul and Jesus reminding us to not let so-called religious activities prevent us from honoring the ones who brought us to life and gave us what we needed to even be participants in the world in which we live.

What else can we do?

When my friend Larry Brown heard that I was going to be teaching about this commandment, he gave me a tape by Dennis Rainey. I had not heard of Rainey before, but I was anxious to get input on the commandment, so I listened to the tape. Rainey, it turns out, is somewhat like Brian Morgan. While Brian is always encouraging us to write poems and so reveal our souls to one another and to God, Dennis Rainey is encouraging everyone to write what he calls "A Tribute" to our parents as a means of honoring them. I found out later that he has a book called "The Tribute." Although I have not read it, if it contains teaching and exhortations similar to what I heard on his tape, then I heartily recommend it to you.

I decided to follow Rainey's advice, and I prepared a tribute to my parents. I read my mom's portion to her on Mother's Day this year. I have not yet completed my dad's portion. I was hoping to get it done by Father's Day, but our little Emily intervened, and I'm still in the editing

process. Rainey advises that you spend a lot of time on the writing of this tribute, and that it does not matter if your parents are already dead when you write it. Also, it doesn't matter if you don't think you write well. Honor expressed clumsily is far superior to no honor at all.

If you can, Rainey says, it's better to read your tribute to your parents face to face. I took Rainey's advice on this too. But let me give you a warning if you decide to do this: Make sure there is lots of Kleenex at hand. I'm not exactly the crying type. I imagined that if I read this tribute to mom on Mother's Day, she would probably start crying and that it would be quite an emotional moment for her. Well, it was. But what I hadn't counted on was the impact it would have on me. I was about two-thirds through the first page when the tears started flowing. And I can tell you that it's hard to read aloud and cry at the same time. Katherine, my seven-year-old, was sitting next to me on the couch while I was reading. She kept leaning over, trying to look into my face. She was amazed. Beyond learning that daddy can in fact cry, think of the valuable lessons she could have been learning during this whole time.

So, this is one thing that you can do—write a tribute for your parents. And even in the most horrible of family situations, I believe that there is some tribute that can be paid to one's parents. Rainey tells the story of one man who wrote a tribute to his alcoholic father. "To My Imperfect Family," he called it. In his tribute he thanked his father for teaching him about racial equality by taking boys from other cultures to go on fishing trips with them.

### **Honoring the Elderly**

For some of you, your parents may be far away (either emotionally or physically, or both), or perhaps they are dead. To you I say, everything that I have said this morning still applies; it's just that you need to broaden the scope of the application. Listen to the words of Moses in Leviticus 19:32: "You shall rise up before the grayheaded, and honor the aged, and you shall revere your God; I am the Lord." The word for "honor" here is different from the one used in the commandment. But the notion is similar. All of us can find the aged amongst us. Seek them out, make friends with them, and listen to the wisdom that the years have given them. Although we may be scared by the unfamiliarity of such contacts, we have much to learn from those who have gone before us. Let us take advantage of the time we have to still speak with them and reach out to them.

When my mother-in-law was recovering from a brain hemorrhage last year, she had to stay for a while in Manor Care, a facility in Sunnyvale. Many of you have visited facilities like this. You know that they are populated by elderly citizens, people for whom Christ died. Many of them have no one to care for them. With few exceptions, they are lonely and sad. They desperately need the love of those in our society who are younger and healthier. They need honor in a world that has abandoned them.

### **Honor in Speech**

My final exhortation to you this morning concerns speech. With a newborn in our home, I am reminded of the sacrifice required to bring an infant into this world. Little Emily will never know about the diaper changes, the sleepless nights, the physical care that she requires. And I don't care that she knows. Hopefully, she will have the honor someday of being a parent who can enjoy the same opportunity of sacrifice. The debt that each of us owes to our parents is not repayable. But one thing we can do is speak of our parents with honor. I was struck by this as I studied the verses in Scripture relating to honoring our parents. Isn't it interesting that cursing a parent should bring the death penalty under God's law? There is no place in a Christian's speech for uncharitable words about one's parents. There may be times in counseling or in moments of profound communication with a spouse or close friend when, for the sake of greater healing, past injustices must be discussed. But Scripture places before us two choices with respect to our parents: praise or silence. Let us choose praise when we can, and silence when we must, for this is the path of honor.

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## RESTORING COMMITMENT IN MARRIAGE: THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

*SERIES: RESTORING THE ANCIENT BOUNDARIES*

Catalog No. 1003  
Deuteronomy 5:18  
Fifth Message  
Wm. D. Hyatt  
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It is an honor for me to come before you today to talk about commitment in marriage, a subject which is very important to me. My wife Yvonne and I are celebrating thirty years of married life this summer. This is a testimony to God's grace and blessing in our lives—and to Yvonne's patience with me. Thirty years may seem like a long time—and it is—but our marriage gets better and more fun each year.

One reason I like teaching on commitment in marriage is that there is so much said about this topic in the Bible. Another reason is the immense benefit that can come to our daily lives by understanding God's perspective on marriage and his desire for us in our marriages. While our culture has lost its moorings on the issue of committed marriage, God's word is like a beacon to guide us.

First, we will take a brief look at the biblical description of committed marriage; then we will explore the meaning of the seventh commandment and the issues it raises. Next, we will look to the New Testament to see how Jesus and the apostles viewed the commandment; and we will close by considering ways to protect and strengthen marriage.

If you are not married, you may wonder if this message is for you. It is! All of us, married and unmarried alike, have the responsibility of obeying the seventh commandment and of honoring marriage, especially within our Christian community.

God's pronouncement that committed marriage is important and should be honored and protected did not begin with the giving of the Ten Commandments. It was made at the very beginning, in Genesis, and it is reinforced throughout the Bible. In Genesis 2, when Adam and Eve were brought together and marriage was instituted, God said, "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen 2:24).

This term, "one flesh," describes the biblical view of marriage. When we hear the words "one flesh," we may think of sexual intercourse. But that physical act does not make two people truly *one* in the biblical sense. Sex is meant to express a oneness that is already there as the result of a marital commitment. An emotional and spiritual oneness needs to be present. Mary Farrar says it well in her book, *Choices*: "We can measure our oneness by the loving commitment we have for each other—emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, and physically. Loving commitment is the glue that cements us into 'one flesh.'" This is why sex outside of marriage or in violation of the marriage vow cannot truly be a "one flesh" relationship.

So "one flesh" refers to a physical oneness. But it implies much more. It implies an emotional and spiritual oneness—a oneness of life purpose. One man and one woman as "one flesh," therefore, is the biblical view of marriage from the beginning, long before the giving of the

Ten Commandments.

In the New Testament, Jesus quotes the verse from Genesis (in Mark 10:6-8), and then adds, "Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (9). Jesus' own words provide both an affirmation of committed marriage and a warning to those who would attempt to damage that commitment. In the book of Ephesians, the apostle Paul also quotes this Genesis verse to refer to the husband and wife relationship. Finally, in Revelation, a wedding feast, a marriage celebration, is the image used when the ultimate picture of the church's relationship with the Lord himself is described.

So from Genesis to Jesus and the apostles, the concept of committed marriage (one man + one woman = one flesh, oneness), is upheld. This is God's desire for your marriage and mine.

Today, society has reduced marriage to a kind of social contract, a legal device to insure the proper distribution of property should the marriage be dissolved at some point. Sitting in the lobby of a Silicon Valley company a few weeks ago, I overheard part of a telephone conversation of the receptionist. Apparently she had been married recently and was discussing her wedding with a friend. She had to go to some pains to explain why she had gotten married in the first place. It seems she was not very successful in convincing her friend, because at last, I heard her say, "After all, it's just a piece of paper." What a commentary on marriage today! But to Jesus and Paul, to the God of the Bible, committed marriage is far more than a mere social contract, far more than "just a piece of paper." It is this high view of the value and importance of committed marriage that leads to a strong condemnation of adultery in the Bible, and to the establishment of this ancient boundary on our sexual relationships by God and the biblical writers.

It is important to keep in mind the context in which the Law was given. It is a misconception to think that the purpose of the Ten Commandments was to create a legal system whereby one could earn God's redemption and acceptance. Notice God's own words at the beginning of the Ten Commandments: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Deut 5:6). This is one of the great formulas of Scripture, one that is used more than 125 times in the Old Testament. It demonstrates that grace was given *before* commandment, law, or obligation was spelled out by God. God had already freely redeemed the nation of Israel from slavery in Egypt.

Obedience to the commandments was the "acceptance procedure," as it were, of this gift of redemption. Living according to this acceptance procedure meant that the blessings were already built in. God's grace to the Israelites had already been received in their redemption from Egypt and their establishment as a nation. Obedience to God's law would result in fuller benefits, in the abundant

life and blessings which would come from living in a community committed to obeying God.

Similarly, Jesus does *not* say to us, “If you obey me, I will go to the cross, die for your sins, and redeem you.” His death on the cross has already happened. We are free to accept or reject its benefit on our behalf. We may say, “Oh, how we love you, Jesus.” But, the language of acceptance is not words alone; it is obedience. Jesus says, “If you love me you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

So obedience to God’s commandments does not earn us anything, but it does demonstrate the true desire of our hearts. The acceptance procedure has the blessing of godly living built in. It is with this understanding in mind that we now consider the seventh commandment.

## The Seventh Commandment in the Old Testament

The commandment is simply stated (Deut 5:18):

**“You shall not commit adultery.”**

Adultery is defined as sexual relationships by a married person with someone other than their spouse. This commandment, therefore, requires sexual purity from married people. As the T-shirt slogan says, “What part of ‘no’ don’t you understand?”

The Bible views adultery as an extremely serious sin. It is a breach of the marriage covenant, the marriage commitment made to our spouse before God, our family and the community at large. It is so serious that in the OT, like murder, it was punishable by the deaths of both the man and woman. While the biblical law prohibits sexual relationships between unmarried people as well (the Bible calls this “fornication”), the penalty for this was not death. The reason why adultery was distinguished from fornication in the OT was that adultery was not only the physical act, but the breaking of covenants, commitments made to God, to society and to your spouse.

Commitment is the issue. Does the marriage vow that you made to your spouse before God mean what it says? Are you faithful to your promise?

This prohibition of adultery was primarily an issue of morality. As moral law, it was written on the hearts of men and women long before the Ten Commandments were given on Mt. Sinai. A good example of this is Joseph (Gen 39:7-9). Joseph was overseer of the household of Potiphar, an important Egyptian official. Potiphar’s wife attempted to seduce Joseph, but Joseph responded, “How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?” Joseph, whose heart was very sensitive toward God, had analyzed this situation correctly. He saw that adultery was a “a great evil” and a “sin against God.” It was a moral issue.

Consider King David. When the full light of truth was shone on his adultery, by the prophet Nathan, how did David respond? Did he say something like, “All marriages go through difficult times”? or “Look, Nathan, Bath and I are both adults. These things sometimes happen.” No. David confessed, “I have sinned against the Lord!” (2 Sam 12:13).

In Proverbs, an adulteress is described as a “wayward wife who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God” (Prov 2:16-17). In Malachi 2:14, an unfaithful man is told that God will not pay attention to his prayers and offerings “because you have broken faith with her (the wife of your youth), though she is your

partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.”

The wisdom literature of the OT states over and over again that adultery is just plain stupid! “A man (or woman) who commits adultery lacks judgment. Whoever does so destroys himself” (Prov 6:32). Adultery is destructive, not only to your spouse and your children, but to you also.

So throughout the Old Testament, adultery is viewed as a breaking of a commitment and a sin against God.

I am sure that many here this morning could speak to the damage that adultery causes, both to innocent bystanders and to the participants themselves. A woman whose marriage was destroyed by her husband’s adultery said recently: “Adultery is not just a matter between two people. It is as hurtful as murder, and the devastating effects never go away entirely. The offenders have the privilege of choosing to engage in adultery, but their families have no choice about the suffering inflicted upon them” (*Christianity Today*). Many of you have been through this pain. You can testify to God’s forgiveness and healing, even though the scars remain.

In the Bible, adultery is used symbolically in the Bible to describe the most blatant idolatry and unfaithfulness of Israel as a nation. Adultery is the metaphor which God, speaking through the prophets, used to describe Israel’s acceptance of the idol worship of the nations around them, and of their rejection of God and his prophets. Passages in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and a whole chapter of Ezekiel illustrate this theme.

The positive value that the seventh commandment upholds is the sanctity of marriage. It attempts to protect the right to a home, the place where children can be taught about God. The commandment places great weight and value on faithful, committed marriage. Why then is the commandment stated negatively? Moral law is always double-sided. Both the negative form (i.e., refrain from evil) and the positive (i.e., do good) are required in order for it to be obeyed. So both are in view. But, as every parent knows, it is easier to state a negative command, like “Stop!” or “Don’t!” Also, the “bent” of our human nature is toward evil, toward sin. That is the direction in which we are naturally headed. So a strong negative statement meets our human nature head on. That is where God puts the ancient boundary on this area of life.

So in summary, the seventh commandment is given to strengthen and protect the blessing of a faithful marriage and a godly home.

## The Seventh Commandment in the New Testament

Now let us turn to the New Testament and see if Jesus and the apostles continue the Old Testament theme of the prohibition of adultery, and whether they uphold the seventh commandment.

We will begin with the story of the woman caught in adultery. This woman was brought before Jesus by the Pharisees; they were attempting to trap him. But Jesus confronted the doctors of the law with their own sin, and one by one they turned and walked away. Then Jesus turned to the woman, and said (John 8:10-11): “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.” Notice that although Jesus offers her forgiveness, he upholds the standard of the seventh commandment by calling her sin exactly what

it was—sin! His forgiveness abolishes her transgression, not the commandment.

In Matthew 5, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks at greater length about adultery: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt 5:27-28). Jesus’ intention here is *not* to reduce adultery to the level of lust, but to show that lust will destroy your soul as surely as the physical act of adultery. Both the lustful fantasy and the lustful act are sinful. But, as we discussed earlier, it is clear that the damage that physical adultery inflicts—much of it on innocent people—is immense. Jesus does not want to leave the Pharisees—or us—with our own little private area in which to engage in “safe” lustful activity—“safe” adultery.

Why did Jesus focus on our thought life? David Roper suggests that our Lord had at least two reasons for stating the seventh commandment in this form:

1) Our thoughts will determine our actions. Jesus says: “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he.” You can avoid adultery by avoiding it in your mind. Turn off those fantasies. David Roper points out that sexual failure is rarely a blow out; it is more like a slow leak. Normally, we are not suddenly taken in temptation and overwhelmed by passion. Failure in this area is the result of a long buildup of sexual fantasy, until failure becomes inevitable.

2) Purity of thought protects our relationship with our own spouses. This is an important point. I especially want men to listen to this: Fantasy erodes our love for our partner. It destroys our *single-mindedness* toward our marriage partner. We will become critical of our spouses and claim that we are unfulfilled by them if we force them to compete with an image of a centerfold model that has been burned into our brain, or compete with a description of sexual athletics that occupies our thought life. The principle here is that Jesus calls us to be faithful to our marriage partner in our thoughts as well as our acts.

Continuing with Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount, look at what he says in Matthew 5:29-30: “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.” Jesus is saying that we need to “cut off” access to the things that stimulate improper sexual thoughts in us.

Again, I want to speak directly to the men here. The reference to the eyes speaks of what we might see. Some of these things are obvious: magazines and movies that are suggestive or pornographic. As a businessman who travels, I know that this is an especially difficult area. You may be tempted to think, “Who would know?” Well, the answer is, you would, and God would! “What would it hurt?” you might ask. The answer is obvious: your relationship with your wife!

The words of Job are helpful here: “I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl” (Job 31:1). Job goes on to say that his eyes might lead his heart, and then his heart might be enticed by a woman. He recognizes the danger in that sequence (eyes, heart, action), and so he says: “For that would have been shameful, a sin to be

judged” (Job 31:11).

Protect your eyes by guarding what you touch. Consider that knob on the television in your hotel room. All you wanted to do was watch the Monday Night football game or the news on CNN. But in flicking through the other channels your eyes and you get into trouble. I know that all you were doing at the magazine rack was looking for the latest Business Week magazine, but it is those other magazines that will cause you trouble in your thought life. Jesus is telling you to watch what you touch.

I am sure that all of us, men and women alike, have our own personal areas of vulnerability. We must get to know our weakest areas and weakest times and build fences around them. Let us lock the “back door” of our life. Paul says, “Make no provision for the flesh (i.e., do not (even) think about how to gratify the desires of (your) sinful nature)” (Rom 13:14).

We also see that the apostles considered adultery as a sinful activity that was very damaging, both spiritually and physically; and that a life characterized by adultery was not consistent with life in the Kingdom of God. As Paul says in 1 Cor 6:9-10: “Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”

Peter warns that the worst kinds of false teachers and false prophets will be characterized by their adulterous behavior: “With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed—an accursed brood! These men are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them. For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him” (2 Pet 2:14, 17-19). If your life has been touched by adultery, you can surely testify to those “empty, boastful words.”

The writer of Hebrews is very clear in this regard: “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and an the sexually immoral” (Heb 13:4). Marriage is “honorable.” This is a clear statement of both the positive value of faithful commitment in marriage and of the sinfulness of adultery.

As serious and damaging as adultery is, however, it is *not* the unforgivable sin. The Lord himself offers forgiveness to all who turn to him in repentance. Look at 1 Corinthians again. After Paul gives the list of immoral lifestyles in 1 Cor 6:9-10, which we just read, he continues: “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (v 11).

In Corinth then, and in Cupertino today, God’s forgiveness is available.

## Summary of the Biblical View

So the Bible has a very high view of faithful, committed marriage. It teaches that a one flesh relationship is not possible outside of a committed marriage relationship. Only when two people are publicly committed to each other, be-

fore God and the community, can they find the complete oneness that God designed marriage to be.

Further, we have seen that in order to protect marriage, a prohibition against adultery was placed in the commandments and in the hearts of men and women. The Bible views adultery as a very serious and damaging sin. It is a “character sin.” Adultery, typically, is premeditated, prolonged, and repeated. It requires a lifestyle of deception and lies to carry it out. Adultery destroys the souls of the participants and damages innocent people. It is no wonder that God himself, the creator of our sexuality, has placed this boundary on our sexual relationships.

## Application

The application of this commandment seems obvious: Do not commit adultery! But that may not be easy. Let’s talk briefly about some of the ways in which we can strengthen our marriages and encourage others in building faithful, committed marriages. Our current popular culture is of no help in this process. As a matter of fact, popular culture is one of the most powerful forces in undermining the idea of faithful, committed marriage. From the President on down, adultery is openly admitted and then ignored by the public as a question of character .

Many television programs are nothing more than adultery with a laugh track in the background. Most popular movies are stories of adultery accompanied by romantic music. The highly regarded movie, *The Bridges of Madison County*, has adultery as its theme. Another new movie that has adultery as its theme is being advertised as the “feel good” romantic movie of the summer. Clearly, our popular culture will be no help to us in honoring our marriage commitments.

As a matter of fact, most people are not even sure what a stable, faithful marriage looks like. In a recent newspaper report, Judith Wallerstein, a lecturer at the University of California, in Berkeley, and a psychologist who has written influentially on divorce, notes that many people she speaks with, both younger, never married, and older, often embittered divorced men and women, claim they have never seen a good marriage and cannot imagine how one works.

So to be faithful to our marriage commitment we need to build some protection into our lives from the onslaught of our culture, our human nature, and our spiritual enemy (the Bible calls these the world, the flesh, and the devil).

To do this, you have to be very honest with yourself about where you are most vulnerable. Know your weakest areas and your weakest times. Then you need to:

1) Discuss these with the Lord and ask for his wisdom and strength to deal with them.

2) Allow yourself to be accountable, to your spouse if possible, but at least to some friends who know you well. Men: you need two or three male friends who have been where you are and who will pray with you and hold you accountable. Women: you also need to develop some honest relationships with other women who are willing to be mutually accountable.

3) Build tangible “fences” around those areas of your life where you are at risk. You may even have to give up

activities and even friends that are not healthy for your marriage commitment.

Finally, you have to work at strengthening your marriage. This is the best part. Be determined to build on the investment you have already made.

1) Start with the Lord. Grow together in him. Ask him to be part of your marriage. Men: the Lord holds you responsible for the spiritual health of your family. Are you encouraging your wife’s spiritual growth? Are you growing with her?

2) Spend time together on a regular basis—without the children! Try to get away for a weekend together a couple of times a year. You can afford it. You cannot afford the alternative. Recently, I asked a friend whose marriage was going through a rough time, when was the last time they both went away together without the children. He thought for a moment, and then said that it had been in 1988. I said, “I think I may have some insight into your problem!”

So work at scheduling a regular time together. Yes, I said “schedule.” Get out your Day Timer. If you don’t schedule it, it will never happen. Building a healthy marriage takes time, but as the book title says, “Good Marriages Take Time, Bad Marriages Take More Time.”

3) Finally, be in fellowship with other couples. Meet with them regularly so that in the Lord you can encourage each other over the rough spots in married life. An important part of obeying the seventh commandment is helping to strengthen and encourage other marriages in the Christian community.

Your marriage is valuable and important, to you and to God. It will require work and prayer on your part—most good things do—but it will be worth it.

I want to close by reading a passage on love by C. S. Lewis, from his book, *Mere Christianity*:

Being in love is a good thing, but it is not the best thing... You cannot make it the basis of a whole life. It is a noble feeling, but it is still a feeling. Now no feeling can be relied on to last in its full intensity, or even to last at all. Knowledge can last, principles can last, habits can last; but feelings come and go. And, in fact, whatever people say, the state called “being in love” usually does not last. ... But, of course, ceasing to be “in love” is not merely a feeling. It is a deep unity, maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habit; reinforced by (in Christian marriages) the grace which both partners ask, and receive, from God. They can have this love for each other even at those moments when they do not like each other; as you love yourself even when you do not like yourself. They can retain this love even when each would easily, if they allowed themselves, be “in love” with someone else. “Being in love” first moved them to promise fidelity: this quieter love enables them to keep the promise. It is on this love that the engine of marriage is run; being in love was the explosion that started it.

May God grant us that “quieter love” that will enable us to keep our marriage commitments.

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## GIVERS AND TAKERS: "YOU SHALL NOT STEAL"

*SERIES: RESTORING THE ANCIENT BOUNDARIES*

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Pat Harrison  
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In this series we are looking at the relevancy of the Ten Commandments in our lives. As we have been learning, these ancient commandments, written by the finger of God on tablets of stone, are still the underpinnings of society. This morning will consider the eighth word from Mount Sinai, "You shall not steal."

I will never forget as a boy curiously taking a cassette tape from a store, then feeling so bad about it, I returned it unopened a week later.

A professional athlete, recalling his high school years, said, "I took a little English, a little math, some science, a few hubcaps and some wheel covers."

Some of you golfers are tempted to steal golf balls, as I am. But Mark Twain said, "It is good sportsmanship to not pick up lost golf balls while they are still rolling."

Perhaps we can all relate to stories of petty, juvenile thievery, or youthful destruction of property, either done to us or by us. However, if we were to dismiss our subject this morning into the realm of obvious criminal activity, or say that we are merely talking about someone else, we will greatly diminish it.

By definition, stealing is taking something that does not belong to us. Stealing is wrong, no matter how small or how big the thing stolen, or whether we get caught or not. This is a basic tenet of any civil society. Anything less is anarchy. No rational society or person would disagree with this.

Where does this value come from? you ask. From God himself! It is part of the created order of life. As such it is reflected in the Ten Commandments, which, in turn, reflect the character of God. This word, "You shall not steal," comes in the second section, the last six commandments, which instruct us how to love our neighbor as ourselves. The first four commandments deal with loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. When Jesus was asked by a legal expert, "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" (Matt. 22:36-40), the Lord replied, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" And then, as if that were not bold enough, Jesus added these words, "Upon these two depend the whole Law and the Prophets." Quite a strong statement from the one who should know! So the commandments are worthy of our attention this morning.

In the sixth and seventh commandments, we have seen that our neighbor has a right to his life and his wife. Today, in the eighth commandment, we will see

that he has a right to his possessions.

Specific case-law in the Old Testament prohibited the secret or open taking of another's property. But it applied much further into everyday life:

It also protected injury done to property. In other words, if you borrow your neighbor's weed-eater and it breaks, you fix it.

It protected against fraudulently keeping another person's property, even through carelessness or neglect. So, return those library books.

It prohibited an employer from withholding wages that were due, or not paying a decent, living wage to an employee. So, even though the "law of the land" may allow paying minimum wage, the law of the Lord may instruct our hearts to put love of our neighbor ahead of profit margin. In other words, taking economic advantage of someone who is weak is robbery.

Conversely, an employee who inflates the number of hours on his time card or pretends to be sick would be guilty of stealing.

Forgetting to pay your bills or abusing credit extended to you would fall into the category of stealing as well.

Clearly, God values honesty and respect of property, but not for the property itself. The heart behind this commandment is that stealing defrauds and damages relationships. Thus, if we cease practicing these things, we would be loving our neighbor.

Do we do a better job loving our neighbor in our world today? Hardly. We know there is massive tax-cheating, insurance and workman's compensation fraud going on. The rule of the day seems to be to take what you can get. The root of stealing remains the same throughout all generations: it is greed and covetousness.

The human condition is to see life from the perspective of a taker, so we defraud our neighbor by taking, manipulating or exaggerating to get what we want. Oftentimes the "end" of advancing our career and protecting our assets, justifies any "means" of doing it.

We usually trust in our own ingenuity and maneuvering skills more than trusting in God. When self-preservation and self-advancement are our goals, a subtle shift takes place in our "bottom line," away from relying on God. If trusting God is going to be too slow or inefficient, then we feel we must take things into our own hands. (The prophet Hosea (ch. 4) links theft with the lack of knowledge of God, love, and faithfulness.)

God's design is that we love people and use things, but we end up loving things and using people.

My three-year-old son is a "taker" by nature. (I wonder where did he get this?) It saddens my wife and me as parents that when we have his friends over, he is very selective with what he wants them to play with. Even a toy he is not interested in suddenly becomes a hot item when another child picks it up. But how different is he than we big kids with our big toys? We've simply exchanged Tonka trucks for being first in line for the next promotion at work.

A taker doesn't understand that everything we have is a *gift*, not a *right*. Our next breath is a gift from God, but we've come to expect it as a right. Someone has said, "When your expectations for what life should give you are high, you experience great disappointment. When they are low, there is more chance for contentment. And when you have no expectations, then everything is a gift!" Perhaps there is some wisdom in that. Indeed, Paul says, "you are not your own...you've been bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

Takers also have a common disease: they think the world "owes them one." The government, a retail outlet, or another person has burned them, so when the opportunity comes to even the score, they feel justified in doing so. Many years ago, I spent time at Vacaville State Correctional Facility—not as an inmate, but as a visitor with a prison ministry. It was interesting to note that the inmates vowed that when they got out, they would "do it smarter." The problem wasn't the act itself, but the fact that they had been caught. But, isn't that our attitude too? We, too, continue to steal from our neighbor, even though it may not violate society's laws.

John the Baptist shook up the culturally accepted practices of stealing in his day when people from all walks of life came to hear him and be baptized. As they approached, he would say to them, "You brood of vipers!" Not exactly a warm welcome. John was not out to make friends and impress people. In Luke 3:7-14, he said to these crowds, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin saying to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham." In other words, the quality of your life should match your lip-service—and don't count on your good bloodlines or educational credentials or resume for winning points with God.

Let us see what else John said to the crowds. Verse 10: "What should we do then?" [they] asked. John answered, "The man who has two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher, they asked, 'what should we do?' 'Don't collect any more than you are required to,' he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, 'And what should we do?' He replied, 'Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.'" John is saying, "Stop and think about the cultural standards and God's standards, based on your new identity. Stop

stealing. Be generous. Be a giver, not a taker."

So, heeding the eighth commandment involves more than simply stopping our stealing ways. There is always a positive moral component to the commandments. We should expect that there is something deeper and more profound in the mind and heart of God—the true intent of this command. Indeed, he is writing it on our hearts through his Spirit as we come to know him.

The positive moral component here is: be an extravagant giver! Start being generous. Stealing is immoral because it is antithetical to the character of God. God is a giver, the opposite of a taker. God loves to give. He gives out of his storehouse of riches and resources as a loving father would to his own children. The basis for human generosity is the generosity of God.

We see this everywhere in scripture. For example:

James 1:5: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

And from Psalm 127:

Unless the LORD builds the house,  
its builders labor in vain;  
Unless the LORD watches over the city,  
the watchmen stand guard in vain.  
It is vain for you to rise up early  
and stay up late,  
toiling for food to eat—  
for He gives to His beloved...sleep."

We can become preoccupied with building up and protecting what we have, but unless we know that God is a Giver who is behind all of the gifts that we have, and unless we learn to trust him, then all our thinking and planning is in vain.

And perhaps the most familiar line in the Bible:

John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, He gave..."

The hymn title says it all: "God, whose giving knows no ending." This is who God is.

Jesus was never a taker. The words of Paul, in 2 Cor. 8:9, in fact, reveal our Lord's attitude: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich."

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reveals the law of love, rather than the law of reciprocal justice, i.e. "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." While he does not address a word that directly corresponds to the eighth commandment, he has much to say about being generous, extravagant givers. Listen to his words, from Matt. 5:39-42: "But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." Jesus intended this to be shocking generosity!

And finally, knowing God as a Giver frees us to re-

flect that same attitude. Paul echoes the eighth commandment in Ephesians, making it even more practical: "Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have (something) to share with him who has need" (4:28). Not only stop stealing, but work honestly so you may have the outward looking perspective of meeting needs.

Further, Paul reminds the Corinthian church that they may be liberal because they may trust that God will supply:

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written:

"He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God (2 Cor. 9:6-11).

We can be generous because God has modeled for us how to be givers; and because he will supply both the desire and the means to be generous as we trust him.

How about us? Are we generous even to the point of perhaps crossing the line of what is expected? Let us be wise and creative in our generosity. And our giving need not always take the form of writing a check. In fact, I think that is the least creative form of generosity. Share your home; don't make it a museum. Donate your time. Unexpectedly come home from work early to spend time listening to and loving your children. But, certainly, start somewhere.

In our Junior High ministry we have a relationship with an inner-city family of nine, seven of whom are children. We are way over our heads when we stop and think about their complex needs, but we're learning to ask God for what we can and cannot do. Our kids help do the grocery shopping. With our limited funds, we realize the family will need butter, milk and eggs before a tub of licorice. And getting to know this family starkly reminds us of how self-centered we have become in our own comfort zones.

We are to hold things loosely in this life and give generously.

I.A.R. Wylie said: "True generosity requires more of us than kindly impulse. Above all it requires imagination—the capacity to see people in all their perplexities and needs, and to know how to expend ourselves effectively for them."

Martin Luther said: "I have held many things in my

hands, and I have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess."

So, it is not enough to stop being a taker; we must have a disposition to give. We must dispense with the world view that what we have defines us and is ours. In fact, everything is God's, and we are his stewards of it. It would be a powerful and irresistible thing if we were to move into our communities with the generosity of Christ. It strikes me that Jesus called a "taker," a thief, into his kingdom as he died on the cross.

As we come to understand the nature of God as a giver, and reflect that nature, perhaps it might touch a soul around us.

To illustrate this, I have asked Dr. Arthur Halliday to read a scene adapted from Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. It is entitled, "The Good Bishop." As you listen, consider the character who has the attitude of a taker, and the one with extravagant generosity.

Jean Valjean was a wood-chopper's son, who, while very young, was left an orphan. His older sister brought him up, but when he was seventeen years of age, his sister's husband died, and upon Jean came the labor of supporting her seven little children. Although a man of great strength, he found it very difficult to provide food for them at the poor trade he followed.

One winter day he was without work, and the children were crying for bread. They were nearly starved. And, when he could withstand their entreaties no longer, he went out in the night, and, breaking a baker's window with his fist, carried home a loaf of bread for the famished children. The next morning he was arrested for stealing, his bleeding hand convicting him.

For this crime he was sent to the galleys with an iron collar riveted around his neck, with a chain attached, which bound him to his galley seat. Here he remained four years, then he tried to escape, but was caught, and three years were added to his sentence. Then he made a second attempt, and also failed, the result of which was that he remained nineteen years as a galley slave for stealing a single loaf of bread.

When Jean left the prison, his heart was hardened. He felt like a wolf. His wrongs had embittered him, and he was more like an animal than a man. He came with every man's hand raised against him to the town where the good bishop lived.

At the inn they would not receive him because they knew him to be an ex-convict and a dangerous man. Wherever he went, the knowledge of him went before, and everyone drove him away. They would not even allow him to sleep in a dog kennel or give him the food they had saved for the dog. Everywhere he went they cried: "Be off! Go away, or you will get a charge of shot." Finally, he wandered to the house of the good bishop, and a good man he was.

For his duties as a bishop, he received from the state 3,000 francs a year; but he gave away to the poor 2,000 francs of it. He was a simple, loving man, with a great heart, who thought nothing of himself, but loved everybody. And everybody loved him.

Jean, when he entered the bishop's house, was a most forbidding and dangerous character. He shouted in a harsh, loud voice: "Look here, I am a galley slave. Here is my yellow passport. It says: 'Five years for robbery and fourteen years for trying to escape. The man is very dangerous.' Now that you know who I am, will you give me a little food, and let me sleep in the stable?"

The good bishop said: "Sit down and warm yourself. You will take supper with me, and after that sleep here."

Jean could hardly believe his senses. He was dumb with joy. He told the bishop that he had money, and would pay for his supper and lodging.

But the priest said: "You are welcome. This is not my house, but the house of Christ. Your name was known to me before you showed me your passport. You are my brother."

After supper the bishop took one of the silver candlesticks that he had received as a Christmas present, and, giving Jean the other, led him to his room, where a good bed was provided. In the middle of the night Jean awoke with a hardened heart. He felt that the time had come to get revenge for all his wrongs. He remembered the silver knives and forks that had been used for supper, and made up his mind to steal them, and go away in the night. So he took what he could find, sprang into the garden, and disappeared.

When the bishop awoke, and saw his silver gone, he said: "I have been thinking for a long time that I ought not to keep the silver. I should have given it to the poor, and certainly this man was poor."

At breakfast time five soldiers brought Jean back to the bishop's house. When they entered, the bishop, looking at him, said: "Oh, you are back again! I am glad to see you. I gave you the candlesticks, too, which are silver also, and will bring forty francs. Why did you not take

them?"

Jean was stunned indeed by these words. So were the soldiers. "This man told us the truth, did he?" they cried. "We thought he had stolen the silver and was running away. So we quickly arrested him."

But the good bishop only said: "It was a mistake to have him brought back. Let him go. The silver is his. I gave it to him."

So the officers went away.

"Is it true," Jean whispered to the bishop, "that I am free? I may go?"

"Yes," he replied, "but before you go take your candlesticks."

Jean trembled in every limb, and took the candlesticks like one in a dream. "Now," said the bishop, "depart in peace, but do not go through the garden, for the front door is always open to you day and night."

Jean looked as though he would faint.

Then the bishop took his hand, and said: "Never forget you have promised me you would use the money to become an honest man."

He did not remember having promised anything, but stood silent while the bishop continued solemnly:

"Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. I have bought your soul for you. I withdrew it from black thoughts and the spirit of hate, and gave it to God."

May we go from this place with hearts moved by the great Giver to cease taking and holding God's silver and rather, like the bishop, love our neighbor through uncommon and extravagant generosity.

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# IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

SERIES: RESTORING THE ANCIENT BOUNDARIES

Catalog No. 1005

Exodus 20:16

Seventh Message

Don Broesamle

August 13, 1995

I have heard pastors say that as they are preparing to preach, they undergo severe bouts of spiritual warfare. Everything seems to break loose. Arguments with their wives, trouble with their children, mechanical breakdowns, emotional traumas, and the like, become commonplace.

In the past, I have tended to downplay this notion as an overstatement. But last week, my wife Linda dreamt that in my sermon this morning, I used as an illustration a wretched sin I had never shared with her. In her dream, she, together with all of you, was hearing about it for the first time! Talk about Body Life! As she slowly awoke, she realized, thankfully, that it was all a dream; it was bogus, impossible! It seems we can be under spiritual attack even when sound asleep. I am having second thoughts about my opinions on preaching and spiritual warfare!

In our series of messages on the Ten Commandments, today we come to the ninth commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." I want to say at the outset that when we are confronted with the standards presented in the commandments, we are faced with the requirement to choose: choose to trust God and his Lordship, and obey him, or choose to go our own way.

Today, people are choosing everything *but* God. *Forbes* magazine reports that even after the recent fatal gassing in the Tokyo subway, an atrocity carried out by a fanatical cult, still there is on average one new cult forming every three days in Japan. One cult worships Buddha, Gandhi, Mohammed, Jesus Christ, the Greek Pantheon, and Elton John—all at the same time! While people are free to choose to follow divergent attractions, the Bible requires a personal choice *by us* to become Christians, not through membership in an organization, but solely by believing in and following Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Friedrich Nietzsche, who had a visceral opposition to Christianity, once described man as an "incomplete animal." The actions of animals, of course, are instinctive; they follow a prescribed imprint. But man directs his existence by choices and actions. He can and must choose. Nietzsche, however, preferred that man be considered instinctual too, and therefore unaccountable to the Creator God. But God wants our choice to be him.

Throughout these studies we have seen that God's purpose in giving the Ten Commandments was first, to

demonstrate his character, and second, to show that our choices and actions could not reflect his character and name unless he himself lived out the law from within our souls. God made us in his own image and likeness so that we would experience his very character in our lives. Sin badly damaged that likeness, and now God's loving covenant of commitment to us is working to restore his likeness in us. The apostle Paul underscores this truth in Philippians 1:6: "I am confident of this very thing, that he who began a good work in you will complete it in the day of Christ Jesus." So from the beginning, God's plan has been to reveal his character *to us* from *within* us.

We have already seen that in the Bible, the words "name" and "character" are synonymous; and throughout the Bible we repeatedly see God's purpose to build and restore his character in us. In the beginning, Adam was taught to learn of God's character and name by the process of naming the animals which God brought before him. As Adam named them according to their differing characteristics, he discovered the fundamental difference between man and animals. That difference is that man has a soul, the place where the Creator God is to dwell, and that man's own character is like God's. This discovery by Adam led to a deepened relationship with God, and an abiding need for God as his Father.

The temple in Jerusalem illustrated this point. When God laid out his plan for the building of the temple, he did not commission it so he could move in. God made this clear in 1 Chron. 17:4, which says, "Thus says the LORD, you shall not build a house for me to *dwell in*." Rather, the temple was intended to house God's *name*. That is what Solomon said in 2 Chron. 2:4, "Behold, I am about to build a house for the *name* of the LORD my God, dedicating it to Him." And David said, in 1 Chron. 28:2, "I intended to build a house for the ark of the covenant of the LORD"—the covenant which embraces God's character, his name.

The temple itself was made following the pattern of man. The outer court represented the body, the inner court the mind, and the soul of man was pictured by the Holy of Holies. It was in the Holy of Holies, the very soul of man, where the ark of the covenant of God's loyal love was to rest, signifying that the character of God must be at home in man's innermost being. The law could no longer be merely an external set of rules. Augustine said that the Christian is "not steered from the outside by a law written on two tablets, but rather is

moved from the inside, as Romans 5:5 says, “because God has poured out his love within our hearts.” Godly choices are not extracted from Christians, rather they well up from within.

The ninth commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,” like the other commandments, cannot be obeyed with any consistency unless the Father’s name is welling up from within our hearts. How many of our comments about our neighbors, and how many of our actions toward our wives and children, our friends and co-workers, can we preface with the phrase, “In the name of the Father...”? What portion of our life and interaction with others is characterized by the name of the Father welling up from within us?

Jesus said on one occasion, “If you want to enter life, keep these commandments.” The instruction here is for us to know him fully, and invite his life and character, his name, to reside at the very core of our being. Our lives in him, and through him our actions towards others, are to be remolded into the likeness of the “name of the Father,” who is characterized by infinite, loyal love.

As we have been taught in this series, the first five commandments teach us how to respond in love to this God of love:

**“You shall have no other gods in preference to me.”**

We are to love God exclusively, the living God who saves us by his own initiative, calling us out of “Egypt” (the world), and into the promised land of life in him.

**“You shall make no image to worship of what is in the heaven, on the earth, or in the sea.”**

God loves us with a jealous heart of ownership.

**“You shall not take the Lord’s name in vain.”**

We cannot love God when we dishonor his character in our lives, our dealings and commitments.

**“Remember the sabbath to keep it holy.”**

We are to rest in God alone for all our needs and our fulfillment. (Here we see God’s requirement for the New Covenant—everything coming from God, and nothing from our own resources.)

**“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged, and it may go well with you.”**

Here is where we begin to learn to love, honor and obey the Lord himself.

As we consider these first five commandments, we can see that they establish man’s right to worship God. The last five commandments establish man’s responsibility to respect the personal rights of his neighbors:

**“You shall not murder.”**

This commandment protects our neighbor’s right to

his life.

**“You shall not commit adultery.”**

God’s command protects our neighbor’s rights to his family.

**“You shall not steal.”**

By this commandment, God protects our neighbor’s rights to his property.

**“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”**

The ninth commandment forbids our speaking falsely against another person, thus protecting our neighbor’s right to his reputation. This commandment was applied in Israel, both in the courtroom and in daily life. Hebrew law required that two or more witnesses be brought forward whenever an accusation was made against someone. We find this in Deut. 19:15-21: “A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed. If a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrong doing, then both the men who have the dispute shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who will be in office in those days. If the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you. And the rest (of the people) will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such an evil thing among you.”

In Israel, a false accusation was a very serious matter.

In the New Testament gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, we find this ninth commandment repeated verbatim by Jesus to the rich young ruler, to inform him of one of the requirements demanded for entering the kingdom of heaven. By this clear evidence we see that God intends no change in his original charge concerning our neighbors.

False accusations can be very destructive. A friend of mine is presently experiencing the trauma of false witness against him. In a business partnership he is being accused of withholding information from tax returns, misappropriating company funds and falsifying records. He is being hounded night and day with threats of lawsuits and worse. He faces sleepless nights, worry and stress, and huge legal fees—all because of these false accusations. The tongue, as the book of James points out, is a small member of the body, but when it is not controlled by the character of God, it can bring devastation and even death. I wonder how many suicides have had as their impetus the ruthless and careless tongues of men and women? God designed the tongue to express love for him and for others, not to express poisonous gossip and false witness.

The Old Testament is both clear and strong in what it says about false witness:

Proverbs 6:16-19: "There are six things which the Lord hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers." Notice that sexual sin is not even listed here. False witness is considered far more damaging, cold-hearted and insidious.

Proverbs 25:18: "Like a club and a sword and a sharp arrow is a man who bears false witness against his neighbor." These are the weapons of aggression; they have nothing to do with godly character.

Proverbs 19:5: "A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who tells lies will perish." God will deal with a false witness. It is an abomination to his name.

Does the commandment also preclude gossip? David Roper says that gossip is like a public hanging: it is perversely entertaining. This is why gossip is so popular—because it is fun to participate in it. But 1 Tim. 5:13 has this to say about people who gossip: "they are *malicious* gossips and busybodies, talking about improper things."

It's tempting to talk about people behind their backs. Sometimes Christians offer the excuse that they want to pray for people and their besetting sin. But if the conversation is not Spirit-led, it is still raw gossip. In Bible Study Fellowship leadership twenty years ago, Miss Johnson, the founder of BSF, always insisted whenever another person was being discussed regarding any area of concern, that we immediately pray specifically for that person, giving him or her to the Lord for his care. It is hard to have a critical spirit against one for whom you are in prayer to the Father. This principle has remained a strong example and exhortation for me.

In the New Testament, Matthew 5 instructs us how to act if we have a difference with our brother. We are told we must even set aside our worship until we have met with that brother and settled any differences between us. I had to do this very thing with my own brother. We met together and discussed the problems between us. Each of us had legitimate grievances, but by honest and open discussion, we worked them out, and God restored our relationship to a greater intimacy than we had ever enjoyed. Matthew 18 teaches that we must take our concern to our neighbor personally, to see if it is well-founded and true, for the purpose of seeking healing. If in the end that neighbor refuses to repent, we are to treat him "as a pagan and a tax collector."

How should we treat a tax collector or a pagan? We are to treat him as Christ treated us before we knew him personally. We are to love him, and lead him to Christ. We must learn to separate the person from the

point of our dispute with him, praying for him in the name of the Father.

In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul gives us the positive application of the truth of the ninth commandment: "Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth, each one of you, with his neighbor, for we are members of one another" (Eph. 4:25). In encouraging us to this changed life, Colossians 3:9-10 says: "Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed, restored, renovated, according to the image of the one who created you."

Renovation work always exposes things we would rather not see. A few years ago we did some renovating in our home. When we removed part of a bathroom wall, we found the remains of a rat wrapped around a water pipe. I remembered that some months earlier there was a strange, unpleasant smell which I could not trace. Now I knew the source of it. It is hardly necessary to say that I did not tell the workers to leave the rat in the wall! I had it removed. How often, when God is doing his renovating work in us, do we insist that he leave in place those things that are detestable to him? We become familiar with the "odor" in time, and learn to live with it. But God wants all of us. We must allow, even welcome, his work of restoration in us. Only by this process can we learn to "love our neighbor as ourselves," and see him as one for whom Christ died.

When God chose Israel and made his eternal agreement with them, he declared to them, "I AM your God, you are my people." It was God's choice, and it depended solely on him to establish them. Then he demonstrated how he wanted them to live, by giving them the Ten Commandments. In a simple, straightforward way, God laid out these commandments, so that no one could mistake his character and his purpose.

God acts in the same manner with believers today. As we sang earlier this morning, "We are the people of God, called by his Name." If you own Christ as your Lord, he will take control of your life and root out the sin of deceit, gossip and false witness toward others. If you are *not* his possession, then no amount of self-effort, trying harder, or new year's resolutions will matter. These things do not impress God; they are inadequate to accomplish any lasting change. God wants us to come to him as we are, and allow his Holy Spirit to change us from within.

A few years ago, a friend told me that he borrowed Ray Stedman's car one day to run an errand. As he drove out of the parking lot into the sun, he flipped down the sun visor. Fastened to the back of the visor, he told me, was a printed sign that read, "No Compromise." That is the character of God, the name of the Father. Without Compromise: this is how we are to learn to love him, and to respect our neighbor's reputation.

May God grant that this is how we will live and act

today and every day in all of our dealings with our neighbors, our families, and one another.

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# BOUNDARIES OF THE SOUL

*SERIES: RESTORING THE ANCIENT BOUNDARIES*

Catalog No. 1006  
Deuteronomy 5:21  
Eighth Message  
Steve DePangher  
August 20, 1995

As we conclude our series in the Ten Commandments this morning, I must say I have thoroughly enjoyed hearing the different styles and perspectives of the men who have spoken from the Scriptures and from their lives over the last couple of months. We have learned that the ancient ethical boundaries given to man by God are worthy of our deepest respect; they are a marvelous picture of the character of our Holy Father.

In this series we have seen that God seeks us out in the midst of our failure, rebellion and pain, calling us back to a life of deep joy within the confines of his protective boundaries. But God's call demands that we face death, and make an ultimate choice. At the conclusion of this message, before we share communion together, I will ask you to make that choice.

So we have two tasks this morning. We will try to understand what the commandment against coveting means for us today; and we will try to answer the question, What is the purpose of the Ten Commandments? Or, to put this another way, we will ask the question the apostle Paul asks in the New Testament, Why did God give the Law?

## Desiring What Belongs To My Neighbor

Once again, the commandment is presented very simply. Exodus 20:17:

**Thou shalt not covet. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.**

I call this commandment simple in the sense that it is straightforward and clear. But it is deceptively simple. This is the commandment that brought Paul to his knees before Jesus Christ. If we understand it clearly, we will find in it a great terror and a great hope.

Let's spend a few moments gaining a better understanding of this commandment in its ancient context so that we can rightly apply it to ourselves today. The tenth commandment, as it was originally given, focused on the desires and lusts that led to the theft of a neighbor's property, the violation of his emotional life and deepest relationships, and the destruction of his ability to earn a living. The specific prohibitions in the commandment covered a broad range, especially in the context of the ancient world. Then, a man's house was a very important asset, as it is today. A man's wife was his most precious relationship. But when God added servants and animals to the list, he was not making trivial additions. In the ancient world, these were the things that gave a man his economic opportunity and, to some degree, his social standing.

So the commandment, although straightforward, applies to many things: we are not to desire, scheme after, envy, or be consumed by the things that belong to our neighbor. We are to respect our neighbor and his property, his right to earn a living, his emotional life, and so on. The Tenth Commandment pierces us deeply, because it focuses on what is going on in our hearts and minds, where God alone fully knows us.

There is one other confusion about this commandment, which stems from the English tradition of translating the Old Testament. To us, the word "covet" has negative connotations. But these are not present in Hebrew. The word "desire," which for us has much less negative baggage associated with it, is an equally

valid translation of the Hebrew. Exodus 20:17 could say:

**Thou shalt not desire. You shall not desire your neighbor's house; you shall not desire your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.**

## To Covet Or Not To Covet?

Christians are not Buddhists. We do not believe that the way to handle desire is to eliminate it from our lives. In fact, the very Hebrew word that is translated "covet" in the Tenth Commandment is used in some Old Testament verses to show that God himself covets. David says in Psalm 68:16 that God "coveted" Mount Zion as a place for his Temple, and the prophet chides the surrounding mountains for being jealous of Mount Zion:

**Why do you look with envy, O mountains with many peaks, At the mountain which God has desired for His abode?**

It is the same word in Hebrew: God has desired, that is, coveted, after Mount Zion.

A most revealing Old Testament usage of the Hebrew word for "covet" is found in Genesis. When God made the Garden of Eden, he made trees that Adam and Eve were to covet. Gen. 2:9:

**And out of the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.**

The word used for "pleasing" is the same Hebrew word that the Tenth Commandment uses for "covet." God made those trees desirable and wonderful. He wanted Adam and Eve to love and care for them. But he also made another tree. Though it too was lovely, it was not an appropriate object of desire for Adam and Eve. It was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. So, we can see that God does want to use that part of us that desires: He uses it to motivate and strengthen us. But he also insists on limits to our desires.

We know what happened next. But some of you may not know the role that coveting played in the tragic story of the fall of man. Eve was enticed by the serpent, and she began to see the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in a new way. Here is what Genesis 3:6 says:

**When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.**

The tree was "desirable" to make one wise. Or, as the Hebrew makes plain, Eve began to "covet" it. She crossed the line. She began to treat this special tree as if it were in the same category as all the other desirable trees that God had made.

Things haven't changed since that tragic moment, have they? We do the same thing today. When we are confronted by a desire to possess something that is forbidden to us, we re-categorize the object of our desire. We move it from the forbidden list and create an excuse or rationalization that allows us to put it on the acceptable list. This is the logic behind the child's statement: "Well, Suzie got to have one," or, "Johnny got to do that." The event or object has been re-categorized in the mind, so the coveting becomes all right.

We do the same thing as adults—only we are not quite as ob-

vious about it. I was standing in line to get on a plane a few days ago, and the person at the gate said that first class passengers and those with little children could get on board. Then the call came for those with back row seats to board. Soon it became clear to me that everyone was getting on board. I heaved a couple of obvious sighs, looked appropriately impatient and exasperated, and then charged ahead too. I wanted to make sure that I got my seat (they might have double-booked some of them), and that I could conveniently put my carry-on luggage where I wanted. What was my justification for breaking the rule? Everybody else was getting on board, and I didn't want to be inconvenienced.

Watch people driving sometime. Better yet, watch yourself. You will see some big-time coveting for those little strips of space on the pavement that allow us to get to the next red light five seconds before the poor guy we just cut in front of. We are saying, "This space is mine. I was here first. You can't butt in." I call this process "re-categorize and rationalize." Thanks to Adam and Eve, it is at the very root of our sin nature, and every person listening to me is an expert at it.

The New Testament, as we would expect, follows the same path as the Old Testament on this subject. It is not desire in and of itself that is the problem; it is the object or source of the desire that determines its moral character. The closest Greek counterpart to the Hebrew word for covet means simply, "desire." If we use "covet" instead of "earnestly desire" to translate Luke 22:15, Jesus told his disciples that he "coveted with great covetousness to eat the Passover" with them before going to the cross.

Ultimately, I am convinced that coveting means desiring anything more fervently than desiring the Kingdom of God. I accept this definition for coveting because I think that is how Jesus and Paul understood it. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus quoted several of the Ten Commandments, correcting the legalistic turn they had taken in the hands of the Pharisees. He referred to some of the commandments without quoting them. I think this is what he was doing in the long section of the Sermon on the Mount, which ends with these famous words:

**"Therefore, do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your Heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."**

If we truly understood these words, and really believed that a loving God stands behind them, then I could end this message right now. But we don't believe what Jesus says here. We think we need to fend for ourselves, and so we live lives marred by coveting everything *but* the kingdom of God.

In Romans 7, Paul also indicates that coveting seems to underlie all other kinds of sin. So let us look at the logic of Romans 7 more closely. This is a complex and difficult passage; I certainly don't understand all of it. But there are some parts that are clear. One is that sin is given life and strength by the law—enough life and strength to kill. Romans 7:7-8:

**I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind.**

When Paul delved into this commandment, he was struck by the awful power of sin in his heart. Instead of being able to say, "I don't desire what belongs to my neighbor; I am OK in this area," Paul found himself reeling in shock at the variety of evil he found there. "Coveting of every kind" was what he found inside himself as his appreciation of the holiness of God's law sharpened his spiritual eyes.

Let's summarize. The commandment, "Thou shalt not covet," must not be understood as a prohibition against desire in and of itself. Rather, it prohibits those emotions, thoughts, plans, dreams and inner promptings that lead us to want to have things which belong to someone else. Jesus and Paul show us that desir-

ing anything as a substitute for the role that only God plays in our hearts is also wrong. "Thou shalt not covet" means, "Thou shalt not desire anything above the Kingdom of God."

### Three Modern Lusts

In our world today I see three areas to which this commandment speaks most directly: the desire for material things; the desire for sensual pleasures; and the desire for approval and recognition. In all of these areas we go to pains to seek out objects and people to fulfill our desires. Let's look at two of these more closely. We will merely glance at the third, since it was dealt with already when we studied the commandment against adultery.

### Amazing Junk

As we saw from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was probably teaching directly about this commandment (like he was on some of the others), even though he did not quote it. What he wants us to understand, though, is that the remedy for wanting stuff is "seeking first the kingdom of God."

Christians in America today need to be woken up to the suffocating selfishness we live in. We are so wealthy, and we find it so easy to be self-sufficient, that we don't see ourselves clearly. It may not be our fault, but we live in one of the most expensive places, in the richest country in the history of the earth. We have everything. Our houses alone are worth more than the life fortunes of entire communities in the poorer countries of the world.

But we are not content with this, are we? We compete with one another, albeit more or less secretly. If friends are coming over, we feel the need to match the level of hospitality they showed us, because we don't want to feel lesser or inadequate. We throw away old things because it's cheaper to get new stuff than to fix the old stuff. A recent *USA Today* poll showed that as retirement age nears, Americans most fear financial and health problems. But aren't these exactly what Jesus taught us to disregard in our search for the kingdom of heaven?

If we look at ourselves honestly, we are not content. We don't really believe that God will meet our needs. We worry about the things we think we need in order to be secure and happy. We have secret obsessions and uncontrolled lusts for the oddest of things.

I stopped for a moment the other day and came up with a list of "stuff" that I call Amazing Junk. Most of this junk is in my house, so I'm not trying to be "holier-than-thou" about this. But these are all things that, if you think carefully about them, are really ridiculous. They show just how rich we really are:

*Automatic fruit juicers.* How often do you squeeze orange juice from real oranges? Do you have, like my family does, a \$35 dollar item that performs this once-a-decade task? What's wrong with that 49 cent piece of plastic that does the trick just as well?

*Exercise machines.* We lavish so much money on transportation and labor-saving devices, that we don't get any exercise. We are so concerned about using time efficiently, that we have devices that promise a beautiful body for only 20 minutes a day! And we can read or watch TV while we become beautiful!

*Most software used on home and company business computers.* The power in much of today's software, when used for writing letters or keeping simple databases, is like owning a jet plane to take you across the street.

*Ties.* This is a pet peeve of mine. Ties, I feel, are designed primarily to spill food on.

*Children's toys.* Designed to remove your child's imagination by doing everything for him or her. And they break almost instantaneously.

*Trash compactors.* We have so much stuff that we need something that will compress our thrown out stuff so that we can be environmentally correct!

Please note: I said that these things are ridiculous, not wrong. No physical object is morally wrong in itself. But the fact that we have so much of the ridiculous in our treasure chests should be

disconcerting to us.

When it comes to stuff, my own area of weakness is twofold: books and software. I love books. I always have. I have books that I have probably moved five or six times in the last fifteen years but have never opened. I have books that come in series. I have big, serious-looking books. I have paperback books. I have books that make me feel intellectual. I have books that make me feel like I must be a very mature Christian. I have books that I probably don't even know I have.

What can we do about this embarrassment of riches? The answer is easy: give it away. But how much should we give? I don't know. That's between each one of us and the Lord. But let me pass on to you some wise words from C.S. Lewis:

I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them...Particular cases of distress among your own relatives, friends, neighbors or employees, which God, as it were, forces upon your notice, may demand much more: even to the crippling and endangering of your own position.

To conclude our look at *Amazing Junk*, I have a suggestion. Go through your house and gather more of your stuff than you can afford and give it away. Give it to City Team, or to Pat Harrison for the family that our Junior High group is ministering to. If you think you want to go a step further, then consider this: Have you planned a recreational or family fun event sometime in the next couple of weeks or months? Cancel it. Take the money that would have been spent on the event and go with whomever you were going to "have fun" with and serve somewhere. Keep your time with your family or friends, but change the event to an act of service.

### **The Lust of the Eyes**

Let me quickly mention here the prohibition in the tenth commandment against coveting your neighbor's spouse. As we have learned, the antidote to this poison is a little different than when it comes to dealing with a desire for material things. Here, the antidote is found in Prov. 5:18:

**Let your fountain be blessed,  
And rejoice in the wife of your youth.**

It isn't that we are to deny or try not to feel the strong urges of physical love within us. It's just that these feelings are to be appropriately channeled within the bounds of marriage.

Now I want to point out one thing that is half scary and half amusing. When God first wrote the commandments for Moses, he said that we were not to covet, and the first specification added to the commandment was that we were not to covet our neighbor's house. Then the Israelites wandered for forty years in the wilderness before they entered the promised land. Moses took the opportunity just before his death to preach a sermon to them before entering the land. That sermon is essentially what the book of Deuteronomy is. In chapter 5, Moses revisits the Ten Commandments. But this time, when he comes to number ten, I think he had learned something, or maybe he was merely trying to improve on God's order. Maybe it was that when they wandered in the wilderness, the Israelites had no houses for their neighbors to covet. In any event, after telling them not to covet, Moses now specifies first, that they were not to covet their neighbor's wife. What happened in the wilderness in those forty years?

### **Coveting Your Neighbor's Admiration and Approval**

I struggle with all three areas of lust that I have mentioned. But by far the deepest problem for me is the burning lust I have for approval and recognition from my neighbors, my colleagues

at work, and my family. For a long time I didn't recognize this in myself. I thought I was fairly independent and didn't really care what others thought about what I did or said. But I've learned that all of that is a cover for me. Deep inside I am yearning for acceptance and approval. But instead of finding rest for my soul in God, I seek it in my fellow man. At work I know that I can be energized for hours and hours and work with amazing efficiency and creativity, all because I am trying to "look good" in front of my peers and superiors. I can steal your admiration and approval just like I can a physical object you possess that I might covet after.

We would be surprised if we could look at our lives the way God does. We would see that much of what we do is posturing and posing. Even in those moments when it would seem that we are acting out the service and love exemplified by Christ, if we looked carefully we would find the craving to be loved, the fear of rejection or the avoidance of pain.

If you are at all like me, then you will relate to this example. Many of you know that over the years I have spent a lot of time working in the nursery during the first service. What does working in the nursery have to do with coveting? you might ask. It sounds more like selfless service, doesn't it? Well, yes, it does. But God knows that I struggle with working in the nursery. I know that I can make people think of me as a selfless servant if I work there. I can hold babies and change diapers, and it is totally safe. The babies are not a challenge to me. I can avoid a whole lot of pain that burdens my adult brothers and sisters here if I am hidden away in the nursery. So it's safe, it's challenge-free, it's easy. And to top it all off, I can *make* a good image for myself out of it. It's a package deal. And part of that package is the continuous presence of covetousness in my heart. I covet your approval of me, so I avoid what might be the real challenge in your life and win your heart by taking care of your child. It looks good on the outside. And yet in God's sight it's sin. He uses it for his glory, of course. But it is sin nonetheless.

Where do you sin and cover it up with an image of Christian service? Why do you work in the Sunday School program? What really motivates you to attend a Home Fellowship group? Why do you sing in the choir? Why do you want to be an Bible study leader? I am not saying that you should not aspire to these things. I could just as well ask, What keeps you from doing these things? It would not be wrong for me to go back to the nursery. It doesn't matter where I go. I carry my sin with me wherever I go. But to miss the presence of sin in our hearts in these areas that look so good on the outside, is to miss the chance to understand how completely depraved we are, and how desperately we need the grace of our Lord Jesus.

I have a challenge for you if you struggle with coveting your neighbor's admiration or approval. Larry Crabb has a book that some of you have heard of: *Inside Out*. I challenge you to take thirty minutes a day for the next month and read (or re-read) this book and write out the answers to the questions in the study guide that is available with the book. Read for fifteen minutes and write for fifteen minutes. You'll be amazed at the result. You will see yourself as the sinner that you are in ways you've never seen before. It will probably depress you. But that's good because, as we will see in a moment, this is the beginning of the path towards death that we must take if we would be saved.

### **Desire and Death**

Have you ever wondered what it might be like to meet someone who really followed the tenth commandment? What would it look like to be free from out-of-priority covetousness? I tried to put some thoughts together on this, but I am afraid it is a poor picture of what the real thing will be like in heaven.

The man who does not covet would be content with what God has given him. He would earn enough money to support his family at a reasonable level. He would trust absolutely that God was responsible and would provide for his material needs. He would spend time seeking out ways to provide for his poorer and spiri-

tually needy neighbors. He would seek the standards of God and the motions of the Holy Spirit in his life above all things. He would delight in the “wife of his youth” (if he had one) and would not have a wondering eye for other women. He could look a beautiful woman in the eye and see a person, not an object. His “free time” activities would be guided by his consuming passion for the welfare of his neighbor.

His house might be somewhat shabby by a lot of standards, because he would not particularly care about physical, passing things. His delight would be in people and relationships instead. His children (if he had any) would probably find him confusing, but very real, and always there for them. They might find him hard sometimes, because he would hold to high standards—the standards of God. Character would be of utmost importance to him in his children. Anything that involved the deep concerns of his loved ones would concern him. He would listen carefully, because the man who does not covet does not need to have his own views expressed above those of others. At work he might be anywhere on the corporate scale, from CEO to stock clerk. And it wouldn't matter. He wouldn't care much about that. Work would not be for him a means to financial security. There is no security in financial matters, he would say. Security comes from God. Work would be an opportunity to interact with people, to love them and serve them.

The woman who does not covet would share many of these characteristics. The apostle Peter would approve of the way she dressed: simply and modestly. She would not make the Ten Best Dressed Women in America list; she probably would not know that such a list existed. And if someone told her about it, she would certainly not be desirous of being on the list. Nor would she be disgusted by it; she would probably find it confusing or boring. Her husband and children would wake up each day and call her blessed. She would also be confusing to her children, caring more about their attitudes and character than about whether they were popular, good in sports, or “well-adjusted.” She, more radically than her male counterparts, would challenge the standards and opinions of a world that demands that a woman be “all woman” on the outside and yet “all man” on the inside. But her challenge would not come through confrontation and argumentation. It would come through the fact that those around her could not deny her heart of love, service and devotion.

I could go on. But the bottom line is this: people who do not covet are people who have their priorities straight, who “seek first the kingdom of God.” They would make most of us a little uncomfortable. We might even think them kind of weird. But we would also admire and respect them.

While studying the tenth commandment, it struck me that my whole life could be described as an attempt to make other people think that I am like the man I just described. If I can get you to think that I am him, then I'll be OK. For a few fleeting moments I saw the depth of my depravity in this area. But I am a pro at dealing with those moments of self-revelation. I know how to cover up. It doesn't matter what we struggle with: we have learned to hide it.

If I am the type who struggles with lust and thoughts of fantasy, that's one thing. But if you find out about it, I'm devastated. So I'm not going to let you find out. If I am the type who is competitive and grasping after material things, I might cover this up in good Christian clothing by teaching a workshop on dealing with being a workaholic. I would be fashionably self-revealing about it. But even this is well-managed and controlled. But if you ever saw the anger, frustration, lust and envy which makes my soul look like a car mechanic's apron after a long, greasy day's work, you would die. No, I would die. I'd just die.

But isn't that what it's all about? Isn't that what the law is for? If the first nine commandments didn't get you, then I hope this

one does. The law forces us to Christ, because it overwhelms us with a holy standard that we cannot live up to. Earlier I read part of Romans 7, where Paul is explaining the dynamic of law and sin in the soul. As the chapter progresses, Paul delves more deeply into the fact of sin in his life, a reality brought to light by the law. Listen as I read some more sentences from Romans 7:

**I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revivd and I died...For I know that nothing good dwells within me...So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand...Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?**

Right now, you and I have a choice. If you are a Christian, then you can keep making this choice, probably for the millionth time. If you have never given over your life to Jesus Christ, then you have the opportunity of making this choice for the first time.

What choice am I talking about? It is the choice we must make in response to Paul's question: “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Who will rescue me from the evil that the law has proved beyond doubt lurks within my heart? Who will free me from the tyranny of my hurtful habits and envious lusts? Who will free me from competing with my neighbor? From longing for his approval? From desiring to have what he has?

There are only two ways to respond to this choice. We can say, in a thousand different ways, “I will do it.” If I try harder, if I dig deeper, if I move away from home, if I stop drinking, if I hang out with a better group of friends, if I go back to that therapist, if I can just get out of debt, if I get that promotion, if my parents hadn't abused me, if I had a husband that listened to me, if I..., if I..., if I... I can somehow or other, do it myself. That's one answer. And in the end where will this get me? Scripture makes this frighteningly clear: It gets me the Hell of Fire, damnation and separation from God, an eternity of loneliness and self-satisfied horror.

But what does Paul say the other choice is?

**Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!...There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.**

The other choice is Jesus: No condemnation. Forgiveness, undeserved. Christians call it grace. Instead of death after death, with him there is Life after death. But first there is death. Are you willing to die? That is the sentence of the law, for all us. And the sentence will be carried out for all of us, for Christian and non-Christian alike. It's just that for the Christian, there is the life of Christ after the death of ourselves.

This quote from C.S. Lewis' book *Mere Christianity*, well summarizes our series on restoring the ancient boundaries:

People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain in which God says, “if you keep a lot of rules I'll reward you, and if you don't I'll do the other thing.” I do not think that is the best way of looking at it. I would much rather say that every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.

What are you becoming? What is your choice?

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