

Love Our Neighbors
Exodus 20:1-2, 12-17
Matthew 22:34-40

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Exodus 20:1-2, 12-17

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;

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

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

Matthew 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'" This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

The Hebrew people have just come out of Egypt. They had been there long enough that all of them had been born there.

As slaves, they lived their lives as their masters ordered. Now God has made them free. Now what?

They don't know how to be in community with each other. Anyone who's watched an elementary school playground, particularly when the kids believe there are no adults around, can tell you that human beings are not born knowing how to treat each other.

God loves these people, so God gives them instructions for living. God does not give them suggestions. God gives them commandments, for all of God's people, from the child to the elderly, from the king in his palace to the beggar in the ditch.

We spoke about the first four commandments last week. They are all about centering our lives on God.

The next six are all about how we live with each other. God is not a fan of *The Lord of the Flies*. God wants to see human beings living together in peace and harmony. So, God gave us these commandments to help us live that way.

I'll touch on the last commandment first, because it gets at the core.

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

It is easier to talk about the commandments that describe doing things. I mean, "Little child, did you shoplift that pack of bubble gum, or did you pay for it?" That's a pretty simple question with a black and white answer.

But this commandment is about wanting to take something away from someone else. It's about what's in your heart. And so are they all.

Honor your father and mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. This is not just an authoritarian rule created by grey-haired people to make sure that we listen to grey-haired people. I don't have to tell this crowd that grey hair often brings experience with it, and, hopefully, the ability to learn from that experience.

God wants all of God's people to live in harmony, with the energy of youth and the wisdom of age being brought together, not fighting against each other. Honoring those older than ourselves, and our parents in particular, helps create that kind of harmony. God wants us to have a future, all of us, together.

You shall not murder. At first glance this is simple. I have never directly and intentionally been the cause of anyone else's death.

Check! Next commandment! Right?

Jesus says, "Not so fast." Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, the very core of Christian teaching, that "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement."¹

We've all heard the saying, "If looks could kill..." Jesus teaches us that wanting to kill someone is sin, too. He goes on to say that, if someone else is angry with you, to even put off making a sacrifice to God, to go and be reconciled with them. Jesus came down here to reconcile us to God, and God wants us to be reconciled to each other. All of us.

You shall not commit adultery.

Again, at first glance, this is simple. It's two words in the original Hebrew. When you got married, you promised not to have sex with anyone else. It is also adultery if you're the one sleeping with someone who is married – this is a sin that, as they say, takes two to tango.

¹ Matthew 5:21-22a.

But there's more to it than that. Some of you may recall a famous magazine interview with then Presidential candidate Jimmy Carter, in which he said that he had committed adultery in his heart.² This made the general news, and garnered that one statement a much greater audience than the rest of the article. Mister Carter was not saying that he had ever cheated on his wife of many years, but he knows Scripture better than, perhaps, the general American public.

Jesus said, "that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."³ If any of us looks at another human being and just sees a body, then yes, we are sinning. We are reducing a person made in God's image to an object.

Jesus goes on to suggest solutions, which are all things to be done by the person experiencing desire.⁴ Many of the people following Jesus and listening to him preach were women. He had an opportunity to tell these women that men's desire was the women's fault, but that perverse idea did not even enter the conversation. He told men (and by extension, anyone who feels desire), that restraining their desire is their responsibility, no matter what someone else does.

We should all keep our promises, including but not limited to our marriage vows, and we should look at all our brothers and sisters as people made in God's amazing image.

You shall not steal.

Again, two words in the original. Very simple. Do not take something that rightfully belongs to someone else.

² *Playboy*, November, 1976.

³ Matthew 5:28.

⁴ Matthew 5:29-30.

The Law expands on that, though. In one sentence it says, “You shall not oppress your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of a hired man are not to remain with you all night until morning.”⁵ In another, it says, “If you take your neighbor’s cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor’s only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep?”⁶

Stealing is not limited to material objects. We are not permitted to take the dignity of another human being. Taking the dignity of another human being includes objectifying them. It includes reducing them to poverty. It includes bearing false witness against them.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

This is where gossip comes in, folks. It doesn’t matter whether you made up the story or not.

Once upon a time, an old man did not like the young man who was dating his granddaughter, so he told his friends that the young man was a thief. The young man was arrested and spent weeks in jail. He lost his job and his relationship with the old man’s granddaughter.

Upon his release, the young man sued the old man. The old man told the court exactly what he had done. He said, “They were just words. Just comments. I didn’t harm the young man. Other people did that – the police, his employer.”

The judge said, “All right. I will pass sentence tomorrow. Today, before you leave this court, write down everything you said about the young man. Then cut the paper up into small

⁵ Leviticus 19:13, NAS.

⁶ Exodus 22:26-27.

pieces. On the way home, throw those pieces of paper out the window of your car, one by one. And I'll see you tomorrow."

The next morning, the judge said to the old man, "Bring me all the pieces of paper with those things you said, and I will pass sentence."

The old man objected, "Your Honor, that's impossible! The wind has spread them all over. Nobody can know where all they went."

The judge nodded slowly. "Exactly. Words and comments can destroy a person's reputation to such an extent that it cannot be fixed. You have stolen something priceless from this young man." And she passed judgment accordingly.

When we tell negative stories about other people, we run the risk of doing that to them. Our words can never be taken back from everywhere they have gone. Modern technology has made this worse, not better, as our words, and those of other people whom we don't even know who they really are, can fly around the world in an instant.

All these commandments are about loving our neighbors, which means all the human beings around us. If we love our neighbors, then we won't do these things.

Wow.

When you understand it properly, this is quite the list of instructions. I don't think any of us manage to follow all of them all the time.

So, what do we do?

First, we need to understand that these commandments are wise instructions from a parent who loves us. God loves us and wants us to live lives centered on God, and God wants us to be healthy and happy and to live good lives.

Second, when we have failed to obey God's commands, there is a proper response. Confess your sin to God. Admit it. Repent, which means turn your life around. Try not to do it again. If you have sinned against someone else, talk with them. Ask for forgiveness. Forgive other people who need it. We talk about these things in the Lord's Prayer, which we say every Sunday.

And get up, dust yourself off, and do better next time.

We will never get it perfect. That is not something we're capable of doing.

But God's amazing grace picks up the slack and allows us to go on, filled with as much of God's love as we're willing to show the people around us.

Thank God!

AMEN.