

September 29, 2013

The National Presbyterian Church

TEN COMMANDMENTS:

If Looks Could Kill

Exodus 20:13

Dr. David Renwick

Many of you know that we are following a series of sermons this fall in which we are looking together at the Ten Commandments, the commandments given by God to Moses somewhere perhaps around 3,500 years ago or so: commandments given to the people of Israel after they had escaped from slavery, and headed across the Red Sea going through the wilderness, the desert, on their way to the Promised Land; commandments given to them not only so that they could grow in their personal character before God, but so that they could grow in their community life before God – and form a community which would be functional and not dysfunctional, a community in which life would flourish rather than death or destruction.

So far we have looked at the first three commandments which focus our attention on *who God is* and *where God is* in our lives.

- You shall have no other gods before me.” No other gods before God. This is about our priorities. God at the top and there is always something in this world to push God off of the top. No other gods before God.
- No idols, no graven images. Our image of God, our imagination about God, these things we need to guard well throughout our days. How we think about God – not just the statues that we make of God comes into focus as well.
- And then, last Sunday, we looked at not taking God’s name in vain – which only in part has something to do with words that come out of our mouths about God (we may call them ‘swear words’). But this commandment is about more than our ‘swear’ words. It is about our whole attitude to the person of God. God’s name has to do with God’s full person and the way we honor God as god within our lives. So, for example, there are times in which we use words about God, make vows to God, promises to God, speak to God, speak about God when we really don’t mean what we say. We may have the best of intentions but we really don’t mean, or mean seriously, what we say. And when that is the case, we are taking the name of the Lord our God in vain. This business about God is serious and we need to give God the seriousness which is due to his honor or to his name.

We should be coming this morning I suppose to the Fourth Commandment but we are not! We are going to be moving onto the Six Commandment this morning neither to the Fourth or the Fifth commandments. The Fourth Commandment is the Sabbath Day commandment and we are going to be leaving that until we come close to Thanksgiving, a special day (like the

Sabbath) in the life of our nation. And the Fifth Commandment is about honoring parents and we are going to be leaving that until we come to All Saints Day, the first Sunday in November.

So we are going to move on this morning to the Sixth Commandment which tells us in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible and in the New International Version of the Bible (and perhaps some other versions as well) that we are not to commit murder. We are not to commit murder. If you go back to the traditional translations, your pew bible, the Revised Standard Version or to the King James Version, you have the more traditional rendering “Thou shalt not kill.”

“No killing” or “No murder”? Well there is a little difference between the two and that difference occurs in translation because there is some ambiguity in the Hebrew word *ratsah* which means to kill or to murder. Either one is possible, and how you translate it really depends on the context. And I suppose it is because (unfortunately) there is a great deal of killing in the Old Testament that the translators in more recent versions have decided that the better translation in this case is about murder rather than killing.

So what is the difference between killing and murder? Well, murder is about the *unlawful taking of life*. The unlawful taking of life – which opens up the door to the possibility that there may be occasions in which the taking of life is lawful, cases in which the taking of life, though regrettable it might be, is not to break this commandment. Or, let me put it this way:

- ♦ If the commandment says do not kill, then the affirmation is of the absolute sanctity of life, the absolute sanctity of human life. We had better be pacifists, we had better be pro-life the whole way no matter what the great issue of life may be. We had better be consistent the whole way down the line. Not only no murder, no abortion, no euthanasia, no war, no death penalty, the whole way down the line but no killing ever on any occasion of human life. Absolute consistency the whole way down.
- ♦ But if the commandment says “no murder,” that is, no unlawful or wrongful taking of life, then God has placed on us an amazing burden: to think about the various complex situations of life and death, to weigh them up, and to decide what it is (even in situations which are often tragic) that we are supposed to do. God, in fact, calls us to play God. God calls us to play God in some situations of life and death in which we have choices to make which are painful and regrettable, but the choice is ours as to when the taking of life is lawful or unlawful.

And that opens up a whole can of worms on issues on which I’m sure those of us who are sitting here today would agree to disagree with one another. I mentioned some of those issues abortion, war, the death penalty, euthanasia and you can think of some other issues as well, some of the huge issues of our society today. Now next Sunday, we will think a little bit about some of those great issues of life so stay tuned and come back next Sunday, and we’ll see what light, if any we can bring to some of those big issues.

I want to think this morning though of a big issue which comes before those other big issues. I want to pick up on the implications of this commandment not for the seemingly great social issues of life but for the seemingly small (but not really small) issues which have to do with our own personal lives, and especially with our personal relationships with other people. I want to pick up on this commandment at the point in our relationships *before* we pick up a gun

and actually kill somebody, *before* we pick up the knife and stab somebody, *before* we hold out our hands and strangle somebody. I want to pick up the commandment at the point where we are so seething mad with other people that we could kill them with our looks, or we could assassinate them with our words – if only we were to give in to the impulse. We are just so mad, we are just so filled with bitterness that we don't quite know what to do in our relationships with other people!

And some of us here today may be carrying around such anger or bitterness within our souls. We are at the place that Cain was before he actually killed his brother and I don't know if you remember the words that God spoke to Cain before he took action. It may just be that we remember the consequences well enough so we don't take that final action but we are seething just as Cain was before he killed his brother. And at that point in Genesis 4, God speaks to Cain and he says to Cain, *"Why are you angry? Why are you so angry? Why has your countenance fallen? Sin is lurking at the door. Its desire is for you. Its desire is to grab you, to take hold of you and to destroy not only the person you want to destroy but to destroy you if you let this anger still manifest itself within you. But you must master it."* You must master it.

You have choices to make way before you commit murder. You have choices to make which are linked to the commandment about murder. You have choices to make about your relationships with other people and if you don't make those or if you just allow things to slide, you are just as guilty as somebody else of breaking this Sixth Commandment. If not breaking the letter of the law, then certainly the spirit of the law. You are guilty as well.

In 1998, our Presbyterian Church adopted a couple of catechisms relating to our faith. A catechism is a way of asking questions and answering questions to describe what we believe, and these were catechisms primarily for younger people in our church but they are wonderful documents to help us know what the Presbyterian Church believes.

- Question 107 of one of those catechisms asked "What is the Sixth Commandment?" And reply is *"You shall not murder."*
- And the next question asks "What do you learn from this commandment?" And the answer is *"That God forbids anything that harms my neighbor unfairly." Murder or injury can be done not only by direct violence but also by an angry word or a clever plan. And not only by an individual but also by unjust social institutions. We should honor every human being including my enemy as a person made in God's image.*

SO, the commandment is broken not merely when we commit murder, but when we treat somebody else in a way which does not reflect the fact that they are made in the image of God. Or, the commandment is broken when we allow a relationship which is in disarray to fester even more, until we plan something to create even more pain than exists in the first case!

This is really the focus of Jesus' teaching about the sixth commandment in the Sermon on the Mount, in the fifth chapter of Matthew's gospel. He says at verse 21,

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder,' and whoever murders shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or a sister, if you are angry with your neighbor, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult your neighbor, you will be liable to the counsel and if you say 'You fool', you will be liable to the hell of fire."

Now Jesus speaks in this kind of abrupt way frequently, just to get people to wake up, and say to ourselves, “Oh, surely that doesn’t apply to me, does it? Surely I’ve never treated a person that way.” Jesus forces the issue to such an extent that none of us escapes unscathed from his words. There is always somebody of whom we have said, or thought, “You fool.” There is always somebody who has done something to us and, if truth be told, it really irks us. It bothers us. And a little bitterness festers. Some of us may be better than others at dealing with such people, but these things happen all the time, and Jesus speaks in such a way to make sure we realize that this commandment applies not just to someone else, but to us! To us! And, what he wants is not only to stop our passion to “get at somebody else” but to give to us a passion to bring healing rather than further destruction! . . . to heal those relationships in our lives that are broken. In fact, we are to become so passionate about healing our relationships, says Jesus, that he doesn’t want us to come to church until it’s done!

“When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. Be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift. Only then, worship. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you pay the last penny.”

It is that important! Heal those breeches that exist in your relationships with others before you try to worship God!

The commandment, then, is not just about murder but about those times in life when looks could kill – and Jesus says, “Deal with it and deal with it now. Sin is lurking at the door. Deal with those festering broken relationships. Deal with it now.”

But how are we to deal with it? What steps can we take toward bringing healing to those broken relationships that bring pain and chaos to our lives?

- Well, sometimes, when dealing with those broken relationships, ***we have to stop saying the thing that we want to say.*** We have to zip our lips instead of making matters worse.
- Sometimes in healing those relationships, ***we have to say something when we don’t want to say anything at all.*** Something needs to be said and we are the one who needs to say it.
- And always in terms of healing those relationships, the ball is in our court. ***We need to be the first one to take the first step to go to that other person.*** As followers of Christ, as followers of the one who came to us who took the first step to us when we were caught deep in sin and came to live and die for us, we are to follow in his footsteps and be the first one to bring healing. Whether it is our fault or their fault, it does not matter, says Jesus.

Let’s think about these briefly each one.

First of all about zipping our lips or not saying those things that we really want to say to just dig that dagger in just a little bit more. The story is told of a preacher from about 100 years ago by the name of Dr. Newman Hall who wrote a book called Come to Jesus. It was a devotional book about the gentleness of Jesus and Jesus’ desire to transform our lives.

It happened that this book was critiqued severely in a national Christian magazine by another minister, and this truly hurt the feelings of Dr. Newman Hall. No matter who we are, unquestionably, when we face criticism it is going to sting just a little bit. And Dr.

Hall was hurt – but to begin with was willing to bear the pain quietly. He was hoping the critique would die away, but apparently all kinds of people picked up on it, and many people began to mock him, making grow furious. In his anger he wrote a letter to the magazine which had published the criticism of his book, and in it he lambasted the minister who had critiqued him. Fortunately, before mailing the letter, he had the wisdom to take it to a friend of his, Charles Spurgeon, who at the time was the greatest preacher in London. He took the letter to Charles Spurgeon to review before he sent it in to be published.

Apparently, Charles Spurgeon read the letter and he said, “You know, it is very fine letter but one thing is missing.” He said, “You know where you sign your name? You need to add an explanation beneath your name: ‘Dr. Newman Hall, Author of Come to Jesus.’” Immediately Dr hall realized that the venomous nature of his letter was inconsistent with everything he’d written in his book, and that he couldn’t send the letter. He ripped it up right there and then.

In going to se his friend, he had taken a wonderful step, a vital step toward keeping the sixth commandment. Sometimes, when there is anger or bitterness within us, we have to find that friend, one whom God supplies, with whom we can share the bitterness, getting it out of our system so that we do not spew it out at the person we believe to be the cause of our pain and trouble. Zip our lips. Find a way to get rid of those words in a way in which they are not directed at the person we want to direct them against. Newman Hall did that in visiting somebody else. Sometimes we have to keep our mouths shut.

Sometimes, though, some of us need to do the opposite! Sometimes we need to open our mouths and be the one to speak, to break the silence, and say something --- something truthful yet positive and healing. This can be enormously hard to do: speaking in such a way that our words are not filled with an underlying message of anger but they are filled with a genuine care and concern for somebody else. So we need to deal with that anger first but we still need to be the ones who speak.

Some of you may remember a Presbyterian minister in the old Southern Presbyterian Church by the name of Charlie Shedd. Charlie Shedd died in 2004, but was a wonderful minister and author. Perhaps his two most famous books were written to his children, Philip and Karen, just before they were married: Letters to Philip¹ and Letters to Karen². He gives advice to his children on what wedded-life is going to be like, -- and it is great advice. The books were written about 30 years ago but they are just as good now as ever they were. In the middle of these letters, there is a chapter in both of the books entitled “Seven Rules for a Good Clean Fight.” What he says about marriage is this, that while marriages may be made in heaven, there are very few in which there is never, ever any disagreement or fighting. And generally when you find ‘absolute peace’ it means that one spouse has won and the other has lost. There is no argument because there is no equal relationship. But, he says, when there is genuine, and necessary conflict in a relationship, then it needs to be handled with care; it needs to be a two-way street. Sometimes there are going to be things that need to be said, BUT before you fire you weapons, he says, “remember the rules.” Let me read them to you:

Rule #1. Before we begin, we must both agree that the time is right. Slow down.

Rule #2. We will remember that our only aim is deeper understanding. Slow down.

Rule #3. We will check our weapons often to be sure that they are not deadly, that we are attacking the problem and not the person. (Ah. How critical to attack the problem and not the person.) Slow down even more.

Rule #4. We will lower our voices one notch instead of raising them a little higher. Just slow down a bit.

Rule #5. We will never quarrel or reveal private matters in public. (Ah, a critical rule. We will find the right place to talk, and never betray private trust.)

Rule #6. We will discuss an armistice when either one calls a halt.

Rule #7. When we come to terms, we will put it away until we both agree that it needs more discussing.

There are all kinds of tactics we can take to make sure that when we open our mouths, when we speak, that the purpose is for healing.

- How critical those words are at times when something needs to be said
- While at other times, nothing needs to be said, and we just need to zip our lips.

And then there are always those times when we don't know whether there is something to be said or nothing to be said, ***when we must go to another and just be with someone***, and it is just our presence with them that matters most, indicating our passion for healing, not murder, not killing, even with looks. Just to go and be there, . . . even at those times when we do not want to be the one to take that first step.

It was probably in 1978 or 1979 that a small church was preparing its Christmas pageant. The rehearsal was taking place on a Saturday afternoon and the production was taking place on a Sunday. The rehearsal had already lasted about two and a half hours and a crowd of parents was gathering to pick up their children as the Sunday School Superintendent kept the rehearsal going, way over time. She was obviously very anxious. The young minister of the congregation stood with the parents. They were growing restless, wanting to take their children home with them.

At a certain point in the rehearsal, the minister decided to go to the Sunday School Superintendent and say to her, "Jean, I don't mean to be rude, but we are way over time. I think we are really doing well. The pageant is going to be wonderful tomorrow." And he went and he did that.

What he didn't expect was that the Sunday School Superintendent would not whisper back and say "Oh yes. I forgot the time."

What he didn't expect was that the Sunday School Superintendent would blurt out loud something like, "Who do you think is running this meeting? Is it you or me?"

Embarrassed and shamed, he went back to the parents and slunk into the middle of the crowd. In a couple of minutes the rehearsal was over. His words did the trick! But the anger and the resentment that he felt was simply enormous.

It was a Saturday, and he went home afterwards to prepare a sermon for the next day, probably on "how to love your friends and how to love your enemies!" He was seething with anger as he prepared this particular sermon. But a voice rang in his head that would not go away.

"You need to go and you need to meet with Jean, the Sunday School Superintendent, and heal things before tomorrow (as in the Sermon on the Mount!). You've got to do it."

“I don’t want to do it” his conscience replied.

“You’ve got to do it,” the voice came back.

And so there was this fight going on in his head, until, finally at about 10:00 at night, he gave in. He headed up the road. He knew that the Sunday School Superintendent and her husband stayed up late. He headed up the road, and knocked on the back door of the house. And Jean opened the door.

I’m not sure what was said at that moment – I happened to be the young minister at the time, but we opened our arms and we hugged, and the two of us became the best of friends in the years ahead.

It was one of the hardest things I have ever done. But one of the most important in my whole life.

Those words of Jesus are the most healing words that we can ever find.

- “Go!” says Jesus. “I don’t want to go,” we say. “Go,” says Jesus, “be the first to heal whether you say something or not, guard your lips.”
- Sometimes speak,
- Sometimes be silent, but, always, go.

You shall not commit murder. It’s not just about the dagger, it’s not just about the looks, but it’s about the need for healing in all of those broken relationships in our lives.

“Before next Sunday,” says Jesus, “examine your lives and make sure that there is healing there between you and your neighbor whoever it may be.”

1. Charlie Shedd, *Letters to Philip* (New York, Doubleday, 1968)
2. Charlie Shedd, *Letters to Karen* (Nashville, Abington Press, 1965)

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4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800