Book 32

Sunday October 6, 1996

TREMENDOUS TRIFLES

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9,12-20

You've probably had this happen to you. The other day when I took my sport coat out of the closet I noticed a loose, dangling thread on the bottom hem of the coat. Instead of cutting the thread, I tried to pull it apart only to find that I had hold of one of those running stitches. Instead of breaking off, the thread continued to unstitch itself until the entire hem at the bottom of the coat came loose. Instead of freeing myself from one little thread, I now had a much larger problem.

Many times in life it's the little things that get us

into the biggest trouble. G.K. Chesterton called these, "tremendous trifles." Life, Chesterton observed, does not usually present us with big temptations or grandiose sins. Instead we constantly encounter little temptations that can easily slip under the threshold of our levels of acceptance and tolerance. These little, apparently insignificant temptations nibble away at us--gradually compromising our integrity with each little bite.

Human moral failure does not usually begin with enormous, glaring misdeeds such as murdering someone, or the armed robbery of a bank. Instead we are far more likely to experience the gradual decay of our human moral fiber with little ethical compromises, small subtle misdeeds, tremendous trifles. Eventually our standards of

acceptable behavior slip lower and lower until we can talk ourselves into almost anything as long as it is to our own benefit.

Just as we can gradually lose our physical fitness when we do not eat properly and exercise our bodies regularly, so also we can lose our ethical/moral fitness when we do not pay attention to it.

How do we go about building and maintaining our ethical/moral fitness?

First of all, we need to know and build our lives on some universal standards of behavior and conduct that will give us guidance in our day to day living and decision making, in the same way as we have guidelines in physical fitness.

One almost universally accepted set of ethical/moral standards especially for Jews and Christians is to be found in the Ten Commandments.

One evening at a social gathering, a woman whose children were not the best behaved in town, decided to give me her opinion on the failure of the church and the schools to give proper moral instruction to the younger generation. It is significant that she did not also mention the failure of the home in this regard. Among other things, she suggested very strongly that if all young people had to memorize the Ten Commandments the world would be in much better shape.

This mother had a good point, although as I mentioned last week there is often a wide gap

between knowing what's right and doing what's right. Yet we have to begin with knowing what's right.

So I asked her, "Do you know the Ten Commandments?" "Of course," she answered, somewhat upset that I had dared to ask. "I wonder if you could name them for me," I replied.

She cleared her throat, mumbled a few words and in embarrassment could only think of two of the ten. "You shall not kill," and "You shall not steal." Our brief conversation came to an end and so did her good opinion of me if she ever had one in the first place.

Like that woman, most of us have heard of the Ten Commandments and most of us believe that

they are very basic and solid rules to guide us, but I also suspect most of us would be hard pressed to name them if asked. For your help they are printed today on the Order Of Worship in their short form.

This year one expectation we have for each member of the confirmation class is that each class member memorize the Ten Commandments.

Some of you have no doubt seen the movie, THE TEN COMMANDMENTS. One of the scenes in that movie is the one in which God is pictured as a kind of divine drill or magic buzz saw. Moses, played by Charleton Heston, is pictured as holding two tablets of stone while the fiery finger of God attacks them, writing out the Ten Commandments in perfect Hebrew. That's a sensational

scene for a movie, but it is not the way ethical systems come into existence, nor is it the way the Ten Commandments originated. They did not drop from heaven fully written but that does not mean they are not inspired by God.

The Ten Commandments and the Old Testament which contains several different versions of them, came out of the living, moving, worshipping life of the Hebrew people and their relationship to the one living God.

All orderly societies need rules and ethical standards. The Hebrew people found that these commandments were fundamental in helping them live together. The commandments reminded them of their relationship with God, helped to protect them from each other and guided them

into building their life together a sense of personal integrity and a sense of God's presence. The Hebrews knew these commandments were from God because when they lived according to them, the whole society benefited.

The first four of the Ten Commandments have to do with our relationship to God, and the other six with our personal behavior and our relationship to each other.

Let's look at the first commandment as an example. It is listed first because it is the foundation upon which all the other nine are based. In its longer form it states and I'm paraphrasing, "I am the only true living God that exists. So do not worship any other gods except me." It is when we begin worshipping other gods which are always

false gods that we get into trouble--the god of success, or the god of money, or fame, or pleasure for its own sake or you name it. This first commandment is probably the one that is broken by most of us time after time.

Paul Tillich, one of the most perceptive theologians of the 20th century often defined a person's god as a person's ultimate concern. Your god is that reality which elicits from you your deepest feelings and your utmost loyalty. Thus your god might be your job, your family or whatever attracts your strongest devotion. In that sense every person has a god he or she worships. The question is not, "Is there a god for you?" but, "What kind of god does your life serve?" Does it give you slavery or freedom? Does it lead to life or death? Does it diminish you or lead you be-

yond yourself?

There are plenty of gods available to worship. Which one do you worship? Ask yourself such questions as these. Where is your first loyalty? What is the ultimate value your life is organized to serve? Where does your security rest?

Or on a deeper level, consider these questions. Does your life serve a unified whole? Or is your life split up in divergent, competitive values, serving all sorts of conflicting goals? If your God is one, then there should be a unity that comes to your life by the worship of that "Oneness."

If God is one, then there cannot be one law that applies to people we like and another law that applies to people we don't like. That's why Jesus

said, "Love your enemies." There cannot be one value by which we relate to people of our own kind and another value by which we relate to strangers.

Now look at commandments, two, three and four. They all relate to the first one. "Do not make idols of any kind." "Do not misuse the name of the Lord your God." "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." Set aside some time on a regular basis to worship God, to keep your life focuse

This leads directly to the second main point in answer to the question, how do we go about building and maintaining our ethical/moral fitness? First of all, we need to know and build our lives on universal standards of conduct and second we need to consciously work at gaining and

maintaining ethical fitness.

Notice how much ethical fitness is like physical fitness. You're not born into physical fitness. You reach it by giving a little effort each day. Sometimes that effort is unconscious, natural, almost accidental especially when we're young. I watch my grandchildren as they run and play and in that way naturally exercise their muscles. Or watch a tiny baby stretch.

As we grow older, getting and keeping in shape requires a conscious, deliberate, sweat-for-sweat's-sake effort of walking, and other forms of exercise.

Reaching fitness isn't enough, you have to maintain it. What's more there's no alternative to the

real work of exercising over an extended period of time. You don't get it with a quick fix. Walking twenty miles in a single day is no substitute for walking regularly every day. Nor do you get it by osmosis. Hanging around active people, reading books on fitness, being a spectator at sports events--these can be worthwhile, sometimes even inspirational. But they just don't cut it when it comes to keeping in shape.

Keeping ethically/morally fit is much the same. You may come from the most moral, high-minded, right-thinking family in the world, and that's a help. You may have been raised in a community of honest and hardworking people and that makes it easier to be ethical yourself. You may even have the good fortune to live with a highly moral spouse and work in an environment where

your colleagues and superiors are naturally inclined toward honesty, fairness and a deep respect for one another--which is terrific. But that doesn't necessarily mean you're ethically and morally fit.

To become morally and ethically fit, you have to think about issues, wrestle with them, be mentally engaged and you have to put your ethical principles into practice day after day. It's a warm and supremely human activity that cares enough for others to want right to prevail. The best definition of ethics or morals that I've ever heard is "obedience to the unenforceable."

A student of the anthropologist Margaret Mead once asked her to describe the earliest sign of civilization in a given culture. She expected the

answer to be a clay pot or perhaps a fishhook or a grinding stone. Her answer was "a healed femur." The femur is a bone in the leg. Mead explained that no healed femurs are found where the law of the jungle reigns. A healed femur shows that someone cared. Someone had to do the injured person's hunting and gathering until the leg healed. The evidence of compassion, she said, is the first sign of civilization.

Ethical fitness is something we all need to work at and the best foundation for it is in our Christian faith with its emphasis on the worship of the one true and living God. It is this God who created each and every human being in God's image. If this God is in every human being in creation, then we must treat every human being in God's creation as sacred and holy. Here is where all

ethics and morals begin.  Amen.