Sunday, March 19, 2006
THE TEN COMMANDMENTS (No. 3 in a Series)
Exodus 20:12-15; Matthew 5:21-22,27-28

In this sermon series on the Ten Commandments, I have noted several times that the first four commandments deal with your relationship to God. (1) "I am the Lord your God." (2) "You shall have no other gods before me." (3) "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of God." (4) "Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy." The remaining six commandments have to do with your relationships to other human beings. In this sermon, I will be discussing three of these: (5) Honor your father and your mother, (6) You shall not murder, and (7) You shall not commit adultery.

Each of these commandments could easily be the subject of a sermon of its own. That's why I encourage you to attend one of the sermon discussion groups. In these groups, you will have the opportunity to discuss each commandment in more depth.

"Honor your father and your mother." Here's a fact that could surprise you. Bible scholars agree that the primary focus of this commandment, contrary to what most people believe, is on adult-parental relationships, not child-parental relationships. Originally, the commandment described the connection between a grown adult and an elderly parent, and then it was expanded to include other longer-living people in the Hebrew culture. It was never meant to be used as a tool to control children by quoting this commandment in an attempt to get them to change their behavior. It does not command children to automatically obey their parents or give parents permission to abuse their children.

It may also surprise you to learn that it is not automatic that children will honor their parents or that parents will honor their children, no matter their age. Research demonstrates that there is a wide variance in cultures as to how elderly parents, grandparents, and other longer-living people are treated. There is also a wide variance in ancient and modern cultures as to how children are treated, but that's for another sermon.

In older cultures, if a person was fortunate enough to survive to an old age, which in fact was rare, he or she was often treated shamefully, with no qualms of conscience. Older people in some cultures were banished from the tribe, left to starve, or even worse. The economic factors of life in many primitive cultures dictated that those older members of the tribe who could not do their part in the struggle for survival would no longer be supported. In other cultures, longer-living people were — and still are — honored. Social security, Medicare, and other welfare measures are some of the ways it is done today.

Most anthropologists believe that loving and honoring one's parents, grandparents, and other longer-living people is not something that comes naturally. I mention this because it helps you see the genius of the fifth commandment. The Hebrew people were commanded in the name of God to give honor to those who had given them life and to give respect to all longer-living people in their midst. Older people were not to be shoved aside as useless. Honor is more than respect; it encompasses appreciation, gratitude, faithfulness, devotion, and the support needed for survival. On the other hand, honor does not mean blind, unreasoning obedience.

To honor your parents and other ancestors is also a commandment to honor yourself, to honor the life force that created you — the good and the bad mingled within you — but not to honor abuse. Those children who were abused, who wince at the name of father or mother, cannot

be asked to honor the memory of the abuse or the abuser. You cannot undo abuse, but you can find a way to honor life by turning that abuse into compassion, not only for yourself but also for all who suffer.

The sixth commandment is brief: “You shall not murder.” Like the fifth commandment, this one also underscores the sacredness of life. One of the most difficult problems human beings have had to face is our unfortunate habit of killing one another. The first murder story in the Bible is that of Cain killing his brother Abel because he was jealous of him. The emotions that caused that murder — anger, jealousy, resentment — are still with us today.

As human beings have become more civilized, some of the murderous raw emotions of human life have been repressed, but they are still present in every one of us. The commandment, “You shall not murder,” speaks to this level of life.

Human beings, contrary to our own propaganda, are not peaceful, nonviolent animals. Jesus knew this. That is why in the Sermon on the Mount, he had this to say about the sixth commandment: “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 sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” This implies that all people, without exception, break the sixth commandment.

Killing one another takes place in so many ways today. Consider the many people who are killed by careless or drunken drivers and with the careless use of guns.

What about the sixth commandment and capital punishment? The Bible speaks with different voices on this matter. In some places, the Bible authorizes legal execution. In the Old Testament, the death penalty was prescribed for a long list of offenses, including murder, treason, idolatry, blasphemy, false prophecy, witchcraft, breaking the Sabbath, rape, adultery, incest, perversion, uttering a curse, striking a parent, and bearing false witness in a death penalty trial. Yet, as soon as the decree was handed down, the Hebrew sense of the sacredness of life began to humanize the punishment, making the death penalty harder and harder to be carried out — just as we have done today.

In this way, the spirit of the Bible overcame the letter of the law. Also, in the story of Cain killing Abel, God is said to have warned against anyone carrying out the death penalty for Cain. You can use parts of the Bible on both sides of the capital punishment debate. You can also use the Bible on both sides of the abortion debate and how that might relate to the sixth commandment.

“You shall not murder.” It is not as simple as it sounds. It also points toward the future. It’s a hope for the future, for a time when human beings will truly value life.

The seventh commandment states: “You shall not commit adultery.” It has to do with human sexuality, with sexual ethics, and with sexual practices. It has as its context the Judeo-Christian view of the sacredness of human bodies and the sacredness of human relationships. It has to do with keeping the covenants and promises made to each other.

No one can live without coming to terms with his or her sexuality. You can deal with it in many ways. You can be celibate. You can redirect your sexuality, discipline it, and enjoy it. You can try to act as if it doesn’t exist, but that’s difficult if not impossible.

In my almost 50 years of ministry, I do not believe there is any sexual problem that I have not had to deal with as a pastoral issue. I have counseled people with homosexual issues and heterosexual problems, with men and with women. I have been a pastor to individuals with premarital pregnancies, unwanted pregnancies, and post-marital childlessness. I have dealt with such issues as incest, infidelity, romantic attachments, rape, and other forms of sexual abuse. Being a minister means that you must seek to love, accept, and forgive people where they are, not where the ideals of life say they should be.

To understand this seventh commandment and what it means today, you have to first look at its original context and then examine how Jesus gave it new meaning and how it can guide you today.

When this seventh commandment first came into use, the Hebrew people followed the custom of polygamy, not monogamy. Most men had more than one wife at the same time. It was also a patriarchal society, so that even with this commandment in force, the early Hebrews did not regard sexual relations between a married man and an unmarried woman as adultery. There was a double standard — one for men and another for women.

A married man committed adultery only if he had sexual relations with another man's wife. For a man, adultery was an offense against another man's marriage rather than against one's own. A married woman committed adultery if she was unfaithful with any man, married or not. Thus, if a married man avoided other married women, he could have as many affairs as he wished and still not break the seventh commandment. Many married men had concubines.

A major reason for this double standard in a patriarchal society was that women were considered property. You can find in Old Testament law that the seduction of a man's daughter was treated as an offense against his property, not as a violation of the seventh commandment. However, if a man seduced another man's wife, he had not only damaged that husband's property but had caused a break in the marriage covenant as well. He was breaking the seventh commandment, and so was she.

So, the seventh commandment in its original context was narrow in its definition. Jesus, however, gave a much wider interpretation to this commandment. In the Sermon on the Mount, he said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Jesus affirmed that human sexuality is good. It is a gift from God. It is part of the human longing for union. This means there is more to sex than biology, more to sex than making babies, more to sex than satisfying a physical drive. The sexual relationship is a function of the total person. It's a way of expressing love for each other. Thus, to see another person as a sex object only, or to treat another person as a sex object only, is an adulteration of the true meaning and understanding of the sexual relationship.

Thus, for followers of Jesus, the seventh commandment is saying that God's good gift of sex is truly celebrated when it is protected inside the love and commitment of vows of fidelity made to each other. Such promises of faithfulness communicate the sacredness of life itself. The sexual relationship at its best involves commitment, friendship, caring, companionship, and the joy of being in each other's presence. It is a relationship of equals. Neither is the property of the other.

As Jesus defined it, there is no room in the sexual relationship for any kind of double standard. That's why Jesus stopped the men from stoning the woman caught in adultery. He wasn't condoning adultery. He was reminding the men that they were also guilty.

He took the Hebrew understanding of the seventh commandment to a new dimension. Women and men are equal. Adultery is the breaking of the covenant of marriage by husband or wife, no matter who the other person is. Adultery is seeing sex as something less than it is meant to be. It is the kind of lusting that sees another person as a sex object only.

Our ancestors in the faith knew that the sex drive within human beings is powerful. It involves the whole person and it can easily be misused. Therefore, they also knew that sexual activity in an entirely unrestricted way is not conducive to the best interests of human society. Thus, some sort of controls have always been necessary. So it should not surprise you that the Christian faith teaches you controls.

That's why the seventh commandment, "You shall not commit adultery," needs to be seen as something very positive. Its purpose is to protect the goodness of human sexuality and the sacredness of the commitment in love. It's also why adultery can be so tragic. It often comes about through the desire to know love and to be loved and wanted. Maybe that's why Jesus was so forgiving of the woman caught in adultery.

If there is anyone who feels self-righteous concerning the seventh commandment, who among you has not broken some aspect of it as Jesus defined it? Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss some of the ways our culture today honors and respects the longer-living, including parents, grandparents, and others who have been like parents to you. Discuss some of the ways we dishonor longer-living people, including your parents.
2. Do you have difficulty in honoring your parents, grandparents, etc.? Why?
3. Discuss the pros and cons of capital punishment. Would it be difficult for you to be the executioner? Recently, there was a news story about a man about to be executed, and he had a serious heart attack and was near death. The authorities did their best to keep him alive so he could be executed. Was that a good idea?
4. Are all or only some abortions a violation of the sixth commandment?
5. Research indicates that a large majority of couples who come to be married have been living together in a sexual relationship for some time. How does that relate to the seventh commandment?