

The Ten Commandments Series
“Commandments 6-10: Trust-Inspiring Limits” OR
“Some Things Are Not Ours for the Taking”
Sermon on Exodus 20:1-17 (11/8 & 11/9/14)
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Three weeks ago we worked through commandments one, two, and three: no other Gods, no idols, no misuse of God's name.

Then, after a bit of a break while I was gone for a weekend, last week we explored commandments four and five: remembering the sabbath by keeping it holy and honoring our parents. And, as interesting as those first five commandments might be to us, I have a feeling that most of us have been waiting patiently for today's message on commandments six through ten.

Murder, adultery, stealing, lying, coveting – these are, like...the *juicy* commandments. If I were a church member and my pastor was going to preach a sermon series on the ten commandments, these are the commandments I would have been waiting patiently to hear about since the start of the sermon series.

Since “do not murder” is in this group, is she going to talk about the death penalty and abortion – especially considering North Dakota's recent vote on Measure 1? And since “do not commit adultery” is in this group, is she actually going to talk about...you know...S-E-X during her sermon?

The answer to those particular questions – in case any of you have been wondering – are “no” and “yes,” respectively.

There is not enough time in one sermon to cover the death penalty and abortion when, in the same sermon, I need to talk about not only murder, but adultery, stealing, lying, *and* coveting. So, no, in this sermon I will not be talking about abortion or the death penalty.

There is, however, a quote in your bulletin insert that references those two issues. And, if any of you would like to have a personal conversation with me about The United Methodist Church's – or my own – beliefs about those issues, I would be happy to have such a conversation.

Now, while it's possible to avoid talking about hot-button issues like abortion and the death penalty in a sermon that includes exploration of the commandment “do not murder,” it is *not* possible to completely avoid talking about S-E-X – or at least referring to it – in a sermon that includes exploration of the commandment “do not commit adultery.”

You may be relieved to know, however, that I won't really say anything *specific* about sex...but we will all have to at least *think* about it when considering the commandment against adultery.

Anyway...all that is to say that these last five of the ten commandments are arguably the most *interesting* commandments for us humans to think about. These are the ones we can kind of make checklists for – the ones that allow us to judge ourselves and to judge others.

These are the commandments that, for the most part, we can see. And, in some ways, that alone is what might draw us to these last five more than the first five.

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Very basically, commandments six through ten are trust-inspiring limits. These commandments are for the benefit of communities attempting to live together in harmony...because these commandments put boundaries around other people's things: they remind us that that which belongs to someone else is not ours for the taking.

That person's life? Not mine to end. That person's spouse? Not mine to be with intimately. That person's stuff? Not mine to take. That person's dignity or reputation? Not mine to destroy with lies or gossip. Anything that doesn't belong to me? Not mine to even *desire*.

It's easy to think of these commandments as restrictive...but imagine what life in this world would be like if we didn't have a sense that these things were wrong. Yes, these commandments *are* restrictive. But, when we know that our friends and neighbors are doing their best to follow these commandments, then we come to understand *trust*.

However, as important as trust is for life in community, I do not think that trust in our fellow human beings is what's at the core of these five commandments.

Or, perhaps a better way for me to say that is that I think trusting our neighbors is of *secondary* importance when it comes to understanding commandments six through ten. Because, ultimately, each of these last five commandments is not just about our relationship with our neighbors...but, each of these last five commandments is also about our relationship with *God*.

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Something that's fascinating to me about these five commandments, is that they seem to be almost backwards. They seem out-of-order, or something – like they go from “most severe sin” to “least severe.”

Murder. One person wrongfully ending the life of another. That's pretty big, pretty obvious, right? Then, slightly less big, slightly less obvious, is adultery. Pretty awful, becoming intimately involved with someone else's husband or wife. But, no one has been *killed* in this case. So, it's bad, but not as bad as murder.

Then comes stealing...just a little bit like adultery. I mean, in adultery, you're kind of *stealing* another person's spouse...but, in "regular" stealing, you're stealing *things*, right? So, probably not quite as bad as adultery, and certainly not as bad as murder...maybe?

Then lying, well, no one's *actually* getting hurt and nothing's getting *stolen* when you lie, so...it's not even tangible. It's just words – definitely not as bad as stealing, adultery, or murder.

And *coveting*...good grief, no one sees or hears coveting except the person who's doing the coveting. It's only one person involved there, doesn't affect anyone else – not *really*, anyway. So it's not as bad as lying, certainly not as bad as actually stealing...and it's not even in the same zip code as adultery and murder. Right?

Does it seem like these five commandments are backwards to anyone else out there? Wouldn't you think that God would have given these commandments to Moses in order of severity, starting with *least* severe and then building to *most* severe? Wouldn't that have made more sense?

That way, the order would have been like this: commandment six would be "do not covet," commandment seven would be "do not bear false witness," eight would actually still be "do not steal," nine would be "do not commit adultery," and, finally, commandment ten would be "do not murder."

That just seems to make more sense to me: to go from "least severe" or "not really all *that* bad" to "most severe" or "really, obviously, very, *very* bad." Wouldn't it have been more logical for God to have given Moses these commandments in that order...? Am I making any sense here?

Well, the fact of the matter is that God did *not* give these five commandments to Moses in that order – God did *not* choose to put them in order of what we might think of as "least to most severe."

And, when I came to grips with the fact that it wouldn't do me any good to think much more about what order these five commandments *could* have been put in...I started to wonder why God chose to put them in the order they actually *were* put in.

Because God usually has a reason for doing what God chooses to do.

So I stopped looking at the order of commandments six through ten as “most severe” to “least severe.” In all honesty, after reflecting on these commandments, I stopped thinking in degrees of severity altogether...

because, after looking at them critically, I realized that the order these commandments are in is not “most to least *severe*,” but, rather, the order these commandments are in is “most to least *obvious*.”

And, when it comes to sin, degrees of “obviousness” have nothing to do with degrees of severity. In other words, just because one sin is not as *obvious* as another – coveting vs. murder, for example – does not mean it is not as *severe*.

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A few years ago, when I was living in Wahpeton, I made a surprise trip to Pierre, SD, for a friend's birthday. If you've ever attempted a surprise *anything* for someone else, you know how tricky it can be. Well, for this birthday surprise, one friend had asked me if I wanted to come for our other friend's birthday – and would I like to surprise her? Sure I would!

Now, this birthday party itself was not a surprise to my friend – nor was it a surprise to anyone of our other friends – but *my* attendance was a surprise. And, at first, it was just me and my friend Josh (the initiator) who knew I would be coming. However, it did not take long before the secret began to leak-out to others.

First, Josh couldn't contain his excitement about our secret plan, so he told another friend who was then, of course, sworn to secrecy. Well, then it didn't take all that long before *I* couldn't contain my excitement, either, so I told another friend...who I also swore to secrecy.

Then, a couple of weeks later I still couldn't contain my excitement over the secret, so I told *another* friend. *Then*, one day before the party, Josh *still* couldn't contain his excitement over the secret, so he told *another* of our friends that I was going to be coming...and then, one of the *other* people who'd been told early on (and had been sworn to secrecy) told another friend...etcetera, etcetera. You get the drift.

It's really a small miracle that my friend whose birthday we were celebrating – the one for whom my surprise was intended – never actually learned our secret. When she arrived at the party, and I jumped out from behind a door and said “BOO!” She responded with appropriate shock, and I knew we'd pulled it off.

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In many ways, the challenge of coveting is not unlike the challenge of keeping a secret...for, like a secret, coveting usually makes its way from our insides out.

Clearly, there are many secrets I, personally, am able to keep – stories or information shared with me in pastoral confidence, for example. But many other kinds of secrets just can't stay inside...they leak out of us, sometimes in small ways, sometimes in bigger, more destructive ways.

And, of course, some secrets are fun, joy-filled secrets that do very little real harm if they leak their way out of us. Unfortunately, this is not the case with coveting. Because coveting is a condition of the heart that, at its core, is neither fun nor joy-filled.

Coveting is about desiring that which does not belong to us. And I would argue that commandment ten – “do not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor” – is the condition of the heart that drives commandments six, seven, eight, and nine.

Coveting is the less *obvious* sin that compels us to commit the *more* obvious sins of lying, stealing, adultery, and murder – each of which may seem to differ in their *severity*, but which really only differ in their degree of obviousness. I'm going say that again because it is extremely important:

Coveting is the less obvious sin that compels us to commit the more obvious sins of lying, stealing, adultery, and murder – each of which may seem to differ in their severity, but which really only differ in their degree of obviousness.

And when it comes to sin – when it comes to breaking the commandments our God has laid-out for us – I don't think it matters to God how *severe* our sin is.

I also don't think it matters to God how *obvious* our sin is. In fact, with one crucial exception, I'm not even sure that any one of the ten commandments is more important for us to keep than any of the others.

That one crucial exception being, of course, the *first* commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.”

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If you turn to the back of your bulletin insert with quotes from *The Workbook on the Ten Commandments*, you'll find this quote toward the bottom: “What we covet tells the story of our lives, because what we will give our devotion and energy to we earnestly desire.”¹

To covet is to look at we currently have, who is currently in our lives, and to say, “*This* is not enough. *You* are not enough for me.”

Coveting takes root in our hearts and we end up making little gods of those things or those people we want that do not belong to us...that's why that quote is so powerful:

¹ Maxie Dunham and Kimberly Dunham Reisman. p. 139

“What we covet tells the story of our lives, because what we will give our devotion and energy to we earnestly desire.”

And isn't it true that, when we find ourselves coveting – *something* or *someone* – we give our devotion and energy to it? We think about it, we dwell on it, we stress-out about it, we lose sleep over it...in the worst-case scenarios of coveting, we end up breaking commandments six, seven, eight, and nine in our efforts to acquire that which we covet.

We will lie to get it – either to ourselves or to others. We will steal to get it. We will cheat. We may even destroy.

In the Gospel of Matthew chapter six, Jesus says that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” To covet is to treasure something – to put our hearts in something – that is *not* ours for the taking.

And do you know what the cure for a covetous heart is? Commandment number one: “You shall have no other gods before me.” So commandment number *ten* – do not covet – sends us right back to commandment number *one*.

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In the sermon a couple of weeks ago on commandments one, two, and three – no other gods, no idols, no wrongful use of God's name – we explored the idea of our God being a “jealous” God...and how that divine jealousy is unlike our petty, human jealousy. That our jealous God is passionately identified and involved with us...and our jealous God is vigilant in maintaining and guarding us.

Our God is jealous for us because, as I said a couple of weeks ago, we belong to God in a way that nothing can ever belong to us. God created us and God is constantly working to redeem us and to bring goodness and meaning into our lives and world.

And so God deserves our devotion – first.

To covet is to allow *something* or *someone* to take God's place in our hearts...it is selfishly seeking *something* or *someone* before looking first to God for guidance. And when we fall into that trap, we can start down a slippery slope that will be very hard to climb back up from.

So, as we seek to live lives worthy of our neighbor's trust, we must first look to God – in every thought, in every word, in every deed...in every desire.

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While coveting is desiring that which does not belong to us, coveting can also mean *earnestly* desiring something –

we sometimes say that we “covet” the prayers of others, for example.

So, one could say that our *jealous* God is also a *covetous* God – a God whose earnest desire is our faithfulness, our worship, our ultimate devotion. May that be what we come to covet as well: faithfulness to God above all else.

Let us pray... God of law and God of love, we are so thankful for the good news that you bless us with grace and forgiveness when we fall short...and we are so thankful there is nothing in life or in death that can separate us from you: not sin, not brokenness, not failure, not fear. Nothing. You continue to draw us to you and to guide us into ever-growing faithfulness to your Son and his holy kingdom. In his name we pray. Amen.