

The Greatest II: Love Your Neighbor

Sermon:

Good Morning/Afternoon! There is a note page in your bulletin so you can follow along with today's message; if you didn't get one and would like one, please raise your hand and one of our men will bring you one.

If you brought your Bible with you this morning, open it to Exodus Chapter 20.

Let's read through last week's main text again; Exodus 20:1-11. If you have an insert, flip it over...it's right there.

¹Then God spoke all these words:

²I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery.

³Do not have other gods besides me.

⁴Do not make an idol for yourself, whether in the shape of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. ⁵Do not bow in worship to them, and do not serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the fathers' iniquity, to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, ⁶but showing faithful love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commands.

⁷Do not misuse the name of the Lord your God, because the Lord will not leave anyone unpunished who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy: ⁹You are to labor six days and do all your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. You must not do any work — you, your son or daughter, your male or female servant, your livestock, or the resident alien who is within your city gates. ¹¹For the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything in them in six days; then he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and declared it holy.

Pastor John stopped there last week, but we're going to keep on reading through verse 17:

¹²Honor your father and your mother so that you may have a long life in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

¹³Do not murder.

¹⁴*Do not commit adultery.*

¹⁵*Do not steal.*

¹⁶*Do not give false testimony against your neighbor.*

¹⁷*Do not covet your neighbor's house. Do not covet your neighbor's wife, his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

If you were here last week you caught Pastor John's opening of this "10 Commandments" series. I'm sure you've heard messages or even entire series' preached on the commandments before, but maybe this one was a little different from what you may be used to.

Instead of simply chugging through the Old Testament passage and calling it good, the focus of this series is the "distilled version"...the 10 commandments boiled down to 2... by Jesus, to the religious leaders of the Jews, the Pharisees. Let's read that passage out of Matthew again, chapter 22, verses 34-40:

³⁴*When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. ³⁵And one of them, an expert in the law, asked a question to test him: ³⁶"Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷He said to him, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. ³⁸This is the greatest and most important command. ³⁹The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands."*

It's always something with these guys, isn't it? Always trying to disprove Jesus' claims by finding some little nuance here or there so they could trip him up and expose him as a fraud. Yeah...how's that workin' out for ya?

Just as every other time they tried this tactic, Jesus not only answers their question, but delivers the answer in a way that teaches the teachers.

In this case, what they've asked is: "Which one of the 10 is the most important?", and what they got was: "No, no...you're looking at this all wrong. You're trying to follow rules...get to the important stuff...the spirit in which the rules were intended to function!"

And the spirit of the rules, as Pastor John talked about last week, the focus of the commandments, is the relationship that we have with our Heavenly Father! That relationship, that love that the Creator has for us, the most special of his creations, is the foundation of these commandments...because as we receive love from him, our response to that should be...needs to be...love. Love for him...and love for each other, the image-bearers of the Father.

To quickly re-cap Pastor John's message last week: commandments 1-4 deal with Jesus' re-statement of the command to: love God. I say re-statement because Moses also stated this command to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 - *⁴Listen, Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ⁵Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. ⁶These words that I am giving you today are to be in your heart. ⁷Repeat them to your children. Talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.*

If you've been here for a baby dedication, those words may sound familiar to you. We charge parents to not only love God themselves, but to teach their children to do the same. The Israel that walked into the land that God had promised them after he rescued them from slavery was not the nation of slaves that was left Egypt. They hadn't seen the plagues or witnessed the deliverance of their ancestors from them. But they knew about them from the stories passed on to them.

Just like they couldn't walk up and lay their hands on the tablets that the 10 Commandments were written on, but they knew those commandments by heart, much like you and I do. When they heard that that nothing...not family, possessions, work...nothing...was to get in the way of their relationship with God, that wasn't a surprise...they knew where that came from.

They knew not to fashion any idol to worship instead of God.

They knew they were to represent God well...by carrying his name in a respectful manner, and by recognizing that their words and actions reflected on who their God was.

They knew that God required them to take rest as even he had. Take a day and set it aside as consecrated to God. Use that time to stop for a second with trying to get that career furthered, that money made. Take a day to turn your attention to the things that really matter...relationship with God, and relationship with other people.

And that's where we pick up in verse 12...the remainder of the 10 commandments that Jesus referenced as the second greatest commandment: the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself.

¹²Honor your father and your mother so that you may have a long life in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Paul re-states this to the Christians in Ephesus as he instructs them in how to live as a disciple of Jesus:

¹Children, obey your parents in the Lord, because this is right. ²Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise, ³so that it may go well with you and that you may have a long life in the land. (Eph 6:1-3)

The first commandment with a promise. Up 'til now Israel has heard "thou shalt not" quite a bit. God takes a break from that theme briefly in the 4th and 5th commandments, and in the 5th specifically, lays the groundwork for the theme that will continue through the rest of the 10. Love people. The remainder of this passage tells God's chosen people, and us, just how to do that...how love is illustrated.

Verse 13: *Do not murder.*

Many of us learned the 6th commandment as the King James version's translation: *Thou shalt not kill*. The Hebrew word used in this verse is *ratsach* which nearly always refers to intentional killing without cause. The correct rendering of this word is "murder," and all modern translations render the command as "You shall not murder." The Bible in Basic English best conveys its meaning: "Do not put anyone to death without cause."

The distinction between kill and murder are important for us to grasp. Murder is "the premeditated, unlawful taking of a life," whereas killing is, more generally, "the taking of a life." During the conquest of Canaan, God ordered the complete destruction of entire cities and nations.

In **Deuteronomy 20 (16-17)** we read: *But of the cities of these peoples which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance, you shall let nothing that breathes remain alive, but you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the LORD your God has commanded you.*

Does that command make God a murderer? No. This was judgment for unspeakable evil rendered by a just and Holy God. The penalty for sin is death, we are told throughout scripture, and it's important to remember that right up until the final judgment, God offers us mercy.

And it's a good thing he does...probably most of us will be able to stand before God on that last day and claim we never murdered anyone. Well...maybe not. Jesus upped the ante on that whole murder thing in Matthew 5:21-22 - ²¹*"You have heard that it was said to our ancestors, Do not murder, and whoever murders will be subject to judgment. ²²But I tell you, everyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Whoever insults his brother or sister, will be subject to the court. Whoever says, 'You fool!' will be subject to hellfire."*

And he did the same with the 7th commandment found in Exodus 20:14 - *Do not commit adultery.* Again in Matthew chapter 5 (27-28): ²⁷*"You have heard that it was said, Do not commit adultery. ²⁸But I tell you, everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

Jesus makes it very clear that sin originates in the heart. The act of committing murder or adultery is wrong, true, but even the thought of them has the same effect. And it has that effect because those acts or thoughts pollute the source of our love for each other and for God...the heart.

Truthfully, we didn't need to be told that adultery is wrong. We don't need to be told that murdering someone is wrong. The fact is, our heart already knows that it's wrong. The knowledge of right and wrong is baked into us like sugar into a pumpkin pie. If you take that knowledge out of us, take that sugar out, what are you left with? One nasty pastry...or one nasty human. Can you imagine going through life with no moral concept at all? How miserable would you be? With no understanding of evil, you could have no understanding of love.

The 8th commandment... *Do not steal.*

It's pretty easy to see how this would fall into that "love your neighbor as yourself" thing, isn't it? If you've ever been the victim of a robbery or burglary, you know the damage that does to you. Your sense of security is impacted, you get angry, you want repayment or at least vengeance. This act, too, goes straight to your heart.

And again, it's easy for a lot of us to go "Well, I've never done that!" Really? Stealing may be defined as "taking another person's property without his or her permission", however, there are many other forms of theft. For example, stretching out those lunch breaks at work or arriving late and leaving early are actually forms of stealing from our employers, stealing time they have paid for. Taking advantage of employers in that way indicates a lack of love for others.

Let's take it a step further: Christians receive tremendous physical and spiritual gifts from God, and we should desire to give back to Him all that we have. When we withhold the things that are rightly His...our time, talents or wealth...we are in effect stealing from Him.

It's said every coin has two sides. That's a technical discussion we don't have time for today...but the other side of "Thou shalt not" is the blessing we receive from obedience. Recognize that all your talents, gifts, time and resources are blessing from God. When we freely give them back to him through service, or giving, or time dedicated to gather together in prayer and worship, then through that we flow our blessings to others, whether directly or through the ministry of the local church. Which indicates our love not only toward our Creator, but to his creation...our co-inhabitants of this rock we call Earth.

Verse 16 gives us the 9th commandment: *Do not give false testimony against your neighbor.* Shakespeare's character Iago in Act 3 of Othello says the following:

Who steals my purse steals trash. 'Tis something, nothing:
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands.
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him
And makes me poor indeed.

In short, you can take my money, it's replaceable. But a person's reputation is the most valuable thing we have; we spend years building it up to be of some value, and in an instant it can be taken from us by a careless or worse yet, purposeful word.

While some cultures draw a line between lying in general, which can sometimes be excused or even condoned...enter the "little white lie", and lying in a court of law, which usually has some criminal penalty attached to it, either is extremely damaging. We might tend to think that this commandment is specific to perjury, but there are several instances in scripture that would oppose that thought.

Proverbs 6 would be one of them: ¹⁶*The Lord hates six things; in fact, seven are detestable to him: ¹⁷arrogant eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, ¹⁸a heart that plots wicked schemes, feet eager to run to evil, ¹⁹a lying witness who gives false testimony, and one who stirs up trouble among brothers.*

It sure looks like Solomon is telling us that *a lying tongue*, which would point to your everyday lie, and *a lying witness who gives false testimony*, which would address more of the perjury side of things...are both detestable to God. It doesn't seem like that leaves much room for argument on what makes us liars in the eyes of God, or on how he feels about it.

The apostle John records the words of God in Revelation 21:8 that lump liars in with a pretty unsavory group: ⁸*But the cowards, faithless, detestable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars — their share will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.* Not sure about you, but I don't want anything at all to do with that lake of fire business.

In Paul's letter to the Colossians he tells them: *Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old self with its practices.* (Colossians 3:9) He also exhorts them to set their minds on things above, to kill the things that belong to their earthly nature, lust, greed, anger, slander...

Slander? Yep. Slander and gossip go hand in hand with bearing false witness. If someone offends you or does something you don't like, that doesn't give you license to go around flapping your tongue about it. You'll never be part of a solution that way,

the breeze you create does nothing but fan the flames of dissent. Remember our Spiritual Hygiene series a few weeks ago? The same thing applies here. Does what you are saying to others pass the THINK test, or is it simply run-of-the-mill gossip?

Verse 17 of Exodus 20, the tenth commandment: *Do not covet your neighbor's house. Do not covet your neighbor's wife, his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers says this about verse 17: *This command seems to have been added in order to teach the general principle that the Law of God is concerned, not with acts and words only, but with the thoughts of the heart. Rightly understood, the seventh and eighth commandments contain the tenth, which strikes at covetousness and lustful desire. But ancient moralists did not usually recognize this: thought, unless carried out into acts, was regarded as "free;" no responsibility was considered to attach to it, and consequently no one felt it needful to control his thoughts or regulate them. It was therefore of importance that the Divine Law should distinctly assert a control over men's thoughts and feelings, since they are the source of all that is evil in word and act; and true godliness consists in bringing "every thought into captivity to Christ".*

The tenth commandment is where we get some heavy emphasis on our dealings with our neighbor. All of the final 6 rest on our interactions with other people, but this one goes beyond sinful action to the source of all sin...thought and heart, as Jesus pointed out in Matthew 5 when he said thinking of murder or adultery is the same as committing the sin.

R.C Sproul wrote: *In many ways, covetousness can be seen as the one sin that gives birth to all the others. Adam and Eve coveted God's knowledge and ate the forbidden fruit in order to make themselves wise, an idolatrous grasp at the Lord's prerogatives. An adulterer must first want someone other than whom he married before he breaks the commandment. A thief is envious of his neighbor's estate before he steals his goods. Voters grow jealous of what other people in a nation have and use the ballot box to "redistribute" wealth. People want to look good in the sight of others and covet the earned reputation of respected people, so they besmirch character and lie about their own accomplishments.*

Sin is embedded deep in us. So what is the answer to the tenth commandment? Have you ever heard the Latin term *Coram Deo*? "Before the face of God."

To live *Coram Deo* is to live our entire life in the presence of God, under the authority of God, to the glory of God. It is a life that is open before God. It is a life in which all that is done is done as to the Lord.

How do we avoid covetousness? Not by erasing all desire, but by cultivating contentment. It can take a long time to discover how to be content in every circumstance, but if we focus on being truly grateful to God for every blessing He has given us, then we will be less inclined to covet that which is not ours.

So these 6...all comprise Jesus' command to love your neighbor...sounds simple enough, doesn't it? Now that we know how to love our neighbor, only one final task remains...we need to define who our neighbor is!

An earnest lawyer asks Jesus this question, "Who is my neighbor?", in Luke 10:29. He asks the question to set up something he wants to say; he was on a mission to "justify himself," as Luke makes clear. And obviously, he was feeling pretty good about how it was going through verse 28. But then comes the curve ball.

Whatever this lawyer had in mind for the answer, it wasn't the story Jesus told. And it's not what we would expect either. We may all know the parable of the Good Samaritan, but when you really look at it, it can be a little confusing. At first glance it would seem that the "neighbor" is the man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho who was beaten and left for dead (Luke 10:30). The neighbor is the object, the one that the other three characters encounter. But Jesus flips it in the end...and says the Samaritan who helped this man "proved to be the neighbor" (Luke 12:36–37).

So here we are today, along with the lawyer in Luke, trying to figure out who it is we're supposed to love, and Jesus has turned the question around on us. Look at this man who acts in mercy. Stop asking, "Who is my neighbor?" There are deeper questions to ponder. As John Piper explains, "When we are done trying to establish, 'Is this my neighbor?' — the decisive issue of love remains: What kind of person am I?" (*What Jesus Demands from the World*, [Crossway, 2006], 264).

And so the question becomes not "Who is your neighbor", but "Who are you?".

Are we going to be like this Samaritan who gives help when help is needed? Or are we going to be caught up in questions about who we're supposed to help, and when and where and how, and what if it will make me late for work, or school, or church?

In his book, *Union with Christ*, Todd Billings builds on Calvin's teaching on the "double grace of justification and sanctification." He explains that when we are made new in Christ we receive forgiveness of sins and Christ's righteousness — we are saved from God's wrath.

And we also receive new life by the Spirit — we are saved for a purpose... to fellowship with God and to love others; clearly the Word of God tells us that we are to be neighbors...to everyone.

Because by inviting Christ into our lives as Lord, we are given a right standing before God (justification), and we are propelled in love for God and others by the new power of his Spirit in us (sanctification).

This truth must alter the way we see those around us. Not because they've become something different, but because we have. God's mercy toward us and work in us...that precious relationship that we share with the Father...assigns us to walk a path of good works prepared beforehand. Ephesians 2:10 says: *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.* On this path are *real* people with *real* lives full of *real* stories.

They may not look like we look; they may not like the things we like. But now when we encounter them, they are a divine call to us. They are an opportunity — actually a command — for us to be... who we are in Christ.

And Christ in us commands not only that we love, but he directs us how to love. *Love your neighbor as yourself.*

Take a moment and think about all you do for yourself. You do everything you can to feed yourself, provide shelter for yourself, take care of your body, make sure your finances are straight, nurture the relationships that are important to you, develop the talents and abilities you've been given. And your experience in each of the things

that you have been successful in doing for yourself...provides you the tools to help someone else that may be struggling in one of these areas.

So Christian...instead of trying to decide who your neighbor is...go be one. Let these greatest commandments echo in your heart this week. Love God by committing everything you are and everything you have to him. Love the people around you in the same way that you love yourself by being the new creature that you have been made in Christ. Perform the good works you have been called to, and let your light shine into the world around you.

Let's pray.