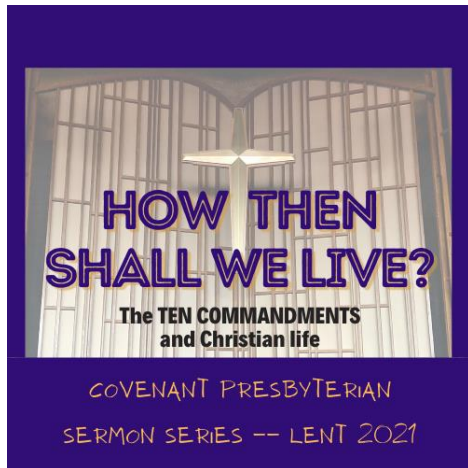


How Then Shall We Live Lenten Series: "Beyond Killing & Stealing"

MATTHEW 5

CHARLIE BERTHOUD | SERMON FOR SUNDAY, MARCH 14, 2021



We are focusing on the ten commandments over the five Sundays of Lent—a season when Christians think about repenting, about turning around, about getting back on track, about living with more integrity as one called a Christian—a child of God, a follower of Jesus.

Ten commandments in five Sundays means we need to move along. Are you ready?

The Bible tells us that Moses had the commandments written on two tablets, and so it's natural to think that the first four—dealing with our relationship with God—are on the first tablet, and the last six—dealing with our relationships with each other—are on the other tablet.

Listen now for God's word from Exodus chapter 20, from "*The Message*."

God spoke all these words:

I am God, your God,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of a life of slavery.

No other gods, only me.

No carved gods of any size, shape, or form of anything whatever, whether of things that fly or walk or swim. Don't bow down to them and don't serve them because I am God, your God, and I'm a most jealous God, punishing the children for any sins their parents pass on to them to the third, and yes, even to the fourth generation of those who hate me. But I'm unswervingly loyal to the thousands who love me and keep my commandments.

No using the name of God, your God, in curses or silly banter; God won't

put up with the irreverent use of his name.

Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Work six days and do everything you need to do. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to God, your God. Don't do any work—not you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your servant, nor your maid, nor your animals, not even the foreign guest visiting in your town. For in six days God made Heaven, Earth, and sea, and everything in them; he rested on the seventh day. Therefore God blessed the Sabbath day; he set it apart as a holy day.

Honor your father and mother so that you'll live a long time in the land that God, your God, is giving you.

No murder.

No adultery.

No stealing.

No lies about your neighbor.

No lusting after your neighbor's house—or wife or servant or maid or ox or donkey. Don't set your heart on anything that is your neighbor's.

* * * * *

Today we focus on “you shall not steal” and “you shall not murder”—the sixth and eighth commandments. And I want to tell you about my very short career as a thief, growing up in Connecticut.

I was about 12 years old, and I was in a gift shop, filled with all sorts of knick-knacks. I was fascinated by little toothpicks that looked like swords. Rather than buy the little container for a dollar or two, I decided it would be a good idea to open it and steal a few of them. So I did.

I have no idea why I did this. I got home with my stolen toothpicks, and maybe I realized they weren't as great as I thought they would be. Or more likely I started

feeling guilty—my own version of “The Telltale Heart.” So a day or two later, I went back to the store and found the already-open container. I put the contraband back in and left as quickly as possible.

Looking back, I should have gone in and told the store people what I did and offered to pay for the toothpicks. But even so, I’m grateful for the awareness that this was wrong. I thank my parents and I thank Westminster Presbyterian Church in West Hartford, Connecticut, where I grew up, for helping me avoid the wrong paths.

Sometimes I wonder what might have happened if I had not been given that solid foundation. Maybe I would have felt emboldened to steal more stuff, and then more. It seems to me that with every step in the wrong direction, it’s harder to turn around.

You can see this in acclaimed dramas like “Breaking Bad” or “Ozark,” where basically decent people take a step in the wrong direction, which leads to another and another, and all sorts of trouble.

We sadly see people going the wrong way in real life, with greed, lying, porn, drugs, adultery, hatred, bitterness, racism.

So it’s really important that we have times like Lent with specific invitations to stop and think about where we are, and if necessary, turn around and get back on track.

Getting back on track is hard to do alone, so we need to encourage each other on the journey, of trying to live as God’s people, loving neighbors, loving God.

* * * *

“Thou shalt not steal” is the eighth commandment. We may not be robbing banks, but there are other things to consider. In his Lenten study on the commandments, Adam Hamilton tells about a clergy friend who tries to always be on time, not wanting to steal time from other people. Wow. All of us have been guilty of this kind of stealing.

Hamilton offers another angle on “thou shalt not steal,” writing:

Let’s talk about taxes.... Have you ever overstated the value of your donations? Not reported all of your income? The most recent estimates are that tax evasion and fraud cost the U.S. government \$450 billion in lost tax revenue every year.... If you don’t pay our share of your taxes, are you smart or are you stealing from the government, from other taxpayers, or from our children, who somehow, one day, must make up the difference.” (*Words of Life*, p. 165)

Early in my ministry, after I officiated at a wedding, the bride’s father thanked me and gave me an envelope, and with a wink he said, “It’s cash, so you don’t have to report it.”

I was stunned. I think I just said “Thanks.” When tax time came around, I did report that honorarium as income, with gratitude again to my parents and my church.

Being a faithful Christian, a faithful child of God, is more than obeying the commandments. It means doing the right thing even when no one else is looking. Jesus calls us to a new righteousness, a new way of living that goes beyond simply obeying the rules.

In Matthew 5, Jesus reflects on what was said in the law, and he calls his followers to a deeper understanding, a new way of living. He says:

“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.”

And later Jesus says:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

So Jesus calls us to more than the letter of the law. He is inviting us to be

transformed.

The gospels tell us of a rich young man who approached Jesus, wanting to earn eternal life. He says he has kept all the commandments—not murdering, not committing adultery, not stealing, and so on, trying to justify himself.

But Jesus calls him to a new righteousness, telling him to sell his possessions and to give the money to the poor.

The commandment “do not steal” invites us to be transformed, to live into a life of kindness, or sharing, of generosity.

I’m lucky in that I see generosity among the people of this church all the time.

And in the challenging time of Covid, we see generosity regularly as well. Last month, Texas dealt with ice storms and all sorts of chaos. At a grocery store outside of Austin, shoppers rushed to stock up, and then the power went out, so the cash registers wouldn’t work. But instead of sending the customers out with no food, the store manager told everyone just to take their food and go.



One customer took a picture and shared a post on social media, titled “The Heart of America” which included this caption:

This is the America that I know. Despite all the negative we hear/see being reported daily in the news. America and most Americans are still kind, thoughtful, generous, and caring.

As for the sixth commandment, on the surface “thou shalt not kill” seems pretty simple. But as with other commandments, Jesus calls us beyond the letter of the law to a new righteousness. Listen again to what Jesus says in Matthew 5:

“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.”

Jesus is teaching us that it’s not enough to avoid murder, but we need to be careful with anger, bitterness, resentment, and move toward kindness, compassion, and love.

“Thou shalt not kill” isn’t as simple as it sounds. Multi-layered issues like self-defense, war, abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment invite us to a more nuanced and contextual look at this commandment.

We don’t have time to explore all of those today, so I’m just going to jump to the bottom line: Jesus calls us to affirm life, however and wherever we can.

Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

In John 10, Jesus says that he came to give us life in abundance, life in all its fullness. Life is a gift to be treasured.

Easter is just three weeks away. Our Lenten journey continues, giving us more time to reflect on the direction of life—where we might need to turn around, how we can move forward.

“Do not steal” invites us to be generous, to be kind, and gracious, recognizing how God has been generous, kind and gracious with us.

“Do not murder” invites us to affirm life, to celebrate life, to make the most of every day, to be joyful, recognizing how God has blessed us with the gift of life.

Thanks be to our generous and life-giving God.