

GIFTS FOR SERVICE

Exodus 20:14-15

Fifth Wednesday in Lent (Series B)

March 14, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The Old Testament lesson is Exodus, chapter 20, verses 14 and 15. It is very short. The advantage of very short readings is that they are much easier to pay attention to and much easier to remember. Please stand as you are able for the Old Testament lesson. From Exodus 20, beginning at verse 14, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁴ "You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ "You shall not steal.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the difficulties with this series on the Ten Commandments has been trying to cover two commandments in one sermon. Sometimes there's just too much to say about each commandment to be able to adequately treat two of them in one sermon. Other times the sermons have seemed choppy, at least to me—like there isn't really a unifying theme because they deal with very different subject matter. I look at the Sixth and Seventh Commandments, and I think to myself, *what do adultery and stealing have in common, other than the obvious thing that they're both bad and should be avoided?*

As I've thought about this, I actually came up with something. You can tell me if you think it's kind of a stretch, but I kind of think it's legit. And it's this: both the Sixth and Seventh Commandments deal with using the physical gifts God has given us in service of our neighbor. In the case of the Sixth Commandment, it's about using our physical bodies to serve one specific neighbor—our husband or wife. And in the case of the Seventh Commandment, it's about using our material possessions in service of our neighbors.

So we've been doing this little exercise with each of the commandments where we not only identify what sinful actions the commandment prohibits, but we also consider what gifts the commandment protects. We've done this with all of the commandments, so maybe you're starting to think it's repetitive and boring. I hope not, because this little exercise teaches us that God's commandments are really gracious and kind. God prohibits certain actions in order to prevent us from damaging and despising the good gifts he has given us.

And instead of starting with what the commandments prohibit, I want to start with what the commandments protect. And sometimes a commandment might protect more than one gift. Sometimes there are multiple gifts it protects, and this is certainly the case with the Sixth Commandment. If we meditate on the Sixth Commandment and consider the various Scriptures that deal with it, we see that there are many various gifts which it protects.

The first and most obvious gift the Sixth commandment protects is God's blessed estate of marriage. And marriage is worth protecting. As we study the Scriptures, we find three estates which God has instituted. In no particular order, they are the Church, the state, and marriage. And only one of these estates was instituted before the fall into sin. It was the blessed estate of marriage. Both the Church and the state were instituted to deal with sin in their various ways. The state exists primarily to punish and restrain sin, and the Church exists primarily to forgive sin. But marriage is different. It goes back to a time *before* sin. It goes back to the creation of the world. Marriage was instituted as a means through which God continues his work of creation. This is why we prefer the term "procreation" instead of "reproduction"—because it's not about reproducing ourselves. It's not about passing on our legacy. It's about participating in and continuing God's work of creation. So God has instituted marriage to continue his work of creation, to bring joy to husband and wife, and to provide a safe and stable home for the protection and teaching of his children. And when marriage and the family are strong, these blessings pour over into society. The best thing any of us can do to make a positive impact in the world, is to make a positive impact in our homes. Nowhere else will you have a greater impact than in the lives of your spouse and children. So by protecting marriage, the Sixth Commandment also protects the home and the children who live in it. And by protecting the children as they are growing up and developing, the Sixth Commandment protects society by providing it with well-trained and God-fearing citizens.

And, like many of the commandments, the Sixth Commandment protects our own persons. Sexual sin has a unique character about it. The apostle Paul teaches us that, "Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body" (6:18). God has given you your body. And it is a good gift. God even intends to raise your body from the dead on the Last Day. He's not going to give you a new body. This body is the one you will spend eternity in. God will take this good gift he has already given to you, and he will perfect it.

Now, the injuries, diseases, and defilements we inflict upon our bodies will not endure past the Resurrection of the Dead. Christ will remove those in the Resurrection, but that doesn't mean we should just do whatever we want with our bodies. Our actions in this life can have lasting consequences on our bodies. An easy illustration of this is the various diseases a person can contract while violating the Sixth Commandment. God would like to spare us from that.

But even if we don't get something nasty, there are still lasting consequences we endure when we misuse our bodies. That is because there is a link between body and soul, and we can't turn it off. It's kind of mysterious, and I don't really know how to explain it, but if you know what I'm talking about, then you know what I'm talking about. When two people join themselves together physically, the link is more than physical. It's emotional and mental and even spiritual. When this link is made properly, it's very good. And when this link is made improperly, it's very bad. And we can't control this. This is simply the way God designed his creation to function.

So in describing the various gifts the Sixth Commandment protects, I've kind of been drifting toward what the commandment prohibits. In its very narrow definition, adultery refers to "voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and someone other than his or her lawful spouse" (Dictionary.com). That's the narrow definition, and this is certainly forbidden by

the Sixth Commandment. But, as we have noted with the other commandments, the Ten Commandments are really a summary of all six-hundred and some commandments in the Bible. So the Sixth Commandment forbids much more than this one particular sin.

Usually the catechism helps us identify the various other sins which are prohibited, but not here. This and the meaning of the First Commandment are the only instances where Martin Luther gives us only the positive aspect of the commandment. He does not give us the negative side. The reason, I suppose, is because he knows that the mere mention of certain sins is enough to tempt us toward them. There's something different about sexual sin, that the mere mention of it tempts us. We may even sin in our thoughts during the course of this sermon. In fact, I assume many of us will. And if that doesn't illustrate our depravity, then I don't know what does. Luther could get away with not mentioning various sins, because they weren't matters of public debate. In our day, though, everything is up for debate.

So I'm going to try, without going into tempting details, to treat the content of this commandment. First, we recognize from various biblical passages that sexual activity is reserved for the relationship of a husband and a wife. Recognizing and accepting this truth will take care of most everything. Instead of naming everything that's out of bounds, I'll simply affirm what is in bounds, and if it's not that thing which is in bounds, then it's out of bounds. And this applies to our thoughts and words as well. Marriage is in bounds; everything else is out of bounds.

Sometimes we try to identify some line we shouldn't cross, and we entertain everything up to that line without crossing it. But this attempt is itself over the line. So if there's anything in your mind that you're wondering, *Is this a sin?* It probably is. If you're too embarrassed to ask me later if something is or is not a sin, you should probably just assume that it is a sin, because it probably is. The definition of what is in bounds is really quite narrow, and everything else is out of bounds.

Now, this is the place where the world accuses us of being "sexually repressive"—like we're trying to steal everyone's right to have fun. That's not what we're trying to do, and that's not what God is trying to do with the commandment. What God is trying to do is protect his good gift of sexuality. More broadly speaking, he is protecting his gracious gift of marriage. Violations of the Sixth Commandment look like fun, but they always end in brokenness and shame. They result in broken families, broken churches, shame, distrust between husband and wife, physical diseases, insecurity about one's self, and probably about a hundred other things. God gives us the Sixth Commandment because he wants to spare us from these tragedies. I cannot impress upon you enough the importance—both for yourself and for those around you—of abstaining from those things that are out of bounds.

But obedience to the Sixth Commandment is not just about abstaining from certain things. Even more so it is about using our bodies to love and serve those whom we have been given to. Even within marriage, we should not really think about sex in terms of our own pleasure. Rather, we should think of it in terms of our husband's or wife's pleasure. Remember that love, even romantic love, is not about our feelings. It is always about service of our neighbor. And in marriage, love is about serving one particular neighbor—the one you are married to. To steal and kind of distort the famous words of Abraham Lincoln, "Ask not what your husband or wife can do for you, but what you can do for your husband or wife." We should take this concept of love as service and self-sacrifice and apply it to every aspect of marriage. We should focus on

the needs of our spouses, without concern for our own, and we should trust that they will do the same. Then both husband and wife will be much better off.

Now if you've ever been married, then you know this is much easier said than done. Our selfish desires get the best of us over and over again. God desires perfection, but we fail to meet his expectations, and so we live in constant repentance. The Christian life is a life of repentance. We confess our sins to God, and we rest in the forgiveness that comes through Jesus' blood, for his blood has justified us from all sins.

But it's not merely before God that we repent. We also repent before one another. We confess our sins to our spouses, because we have sinned against them. And even though we know perfection is not possible, we continually strive to do better. We try to love our spouses more purely. If we manage to improve our behavior, it makes absolutely no difference in our standing before God. But it makes a huge difference to our spouses. And that is why we work. That is why we try. That is why we sacrifice ourselves.

So we've already said quite a bit regarding the Sixth Commandment, and there is much more that could be said, but we will leave it at that. Let me just review our prohibit and protect thing. The Sixth Commandment prohibits every sexual thought, word, and deed that does not serve our husband or wife. And by prohibiting these sins, the Sixth Commandment protects the blessed estate of marriage and a whole bunch of other things too.

And the Seventh Commandment: The Seventh Commandment deals with using the material possessions God has given us in service of our neighbors. It prohibits all forms of stealing. It certainly prohibits the obvious forms of shoplifting and theft. But it also prohibits the less obvious forms. Being that we're barely a month away from tax day, this is the season for tax evasion. Tax evasion is a sin against the Seventh Commandment. If you are a business owner, charging too much for goods and services is a violation of the commandment. If you are a customer, accepting too much change is a violation of the commandment. If you like to sue people, frivolous lawsuits are a violation of the commandment. Anything we do to rob our neighbor of his money or property is a violation.

We also sin when we're just a little bit not fair. When we deal with our neighbors in terms of money or property, we naturally look out for our own best interests. We naturally pay attention to what's happening to make sure we don't get taken advantage of. And this is wise, but it's also selfish. We have a responsibility as children of God to also look out for our neighbor's best interest. If you go to a garage sale and find some rare and valuable antique that is priced for \$.50, you should not buy it for \$.50. That would be a sin. You should either buy it for the actual value, or, if you don't want to buy it for that price, you should at least inform the owner of the actual value so someone else doesn't sin against him.

And if you have something that is of little value, but your neighbor thinks it is of great value, you should insist that he obtain it from you for the little value, even if you could get much more from him. Several years ago I was playing in a fantasy baseball league with some friends. There was no money involved, so I don't feel too bad about this—just a little bit bad. And I traded Bartolo Colón to my friend for Mark Teixeira. If you don't know who those people are, that's okay. Suffice it to say, I ripped him off. This was when Bartolo Colón was average and Mark Teixeira was really good. And everyone in our league knew it but him. All the other owners knew I was ripping him off, and they weren't happy about it, but they couldn't do anything

about it, because it was all within the rules of the game. My friend thought he was getting a good deal when everyone else, including me, knew he was not. There are many things in this world that are legal, but legality does not make something moral.

So the Seventh Commandment exists to protect the gift of personal property—both your property and your neighbor’s property. So obedience to this commandment involves not just refraining from certain sins, but it also involves proactively looking out for the property of your neighbor. If you see his house on fire, you have an obligation as a Christian neighbor, to do something about it.

Now, as we’ve talked about these commandments, I have attempted to show just how high God’s standard is. God has set the bar very high. This will, hopefully, spur us on to try harder and harder to keep the commandments as an act of love toward our neighbor. But it also reveals to us just how far we have fallen short. As we’ve talked about these commandments, I suspect you have remembered various things from your past that were not right. We recognize, and rightly so, that we fall under God’s condemnation. We have nothing to cling to but his infinite mercy.

And I want you to think about that word “infinite.” God does not give us just enough mercy, just enough grace, or just enough forgiveness to get by. Sometimes we have this sort of natural, but kind of weird, idea that God’s grace fills in what we lack—kind of like we do what we can and God provides the rest—kind of like we have maybe ten percent of the righteousness we need to get to heaven, and God gives us the other ninety percent. If this is true, then the more good works we do, then the less we need God’s grace, and we have something to boast about.

But this idea is totally wrong. By his grace, God does provide what we lack, but it’s never any percentage other than one-hundred. Now maybe this is discouraging to you. Maybe it sounds like I’m trying to take away the last little bit of boasting you have left. Not at all. The Scriptures give you something real to boast in—Jesus Christ and his blood on your account.

In the gospel lesson Jesus taught us that he “**came to seek and to save the lost**” (Luke 19:10). It doesn’t say he came to seek and to save the sort-of lost, or even the mostly lost. It doesn’t say he came to seek and to save those who are starting to find their way back. He “**came to seek and to save the lost.**” And this should be the greatest encouragement to us, because when it comes to being lost, you are either lost or you are not. Your good works, good intentions, and good vibes toward God cannot make you less lost. And your sins, no matter how great they are, cannot make you more lost. Jesus Christ came to seek and to save you.

We cling not to God’s pretty good mercy. We cling to his infinite mercy. And there we find the blood of our Savior Jesus Christ. It is this holy and precious blood, which is of infinite value, that pleads for our forgiveness. God forgives you on account of this, and nothing else. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.