

You Shall Not Steal *God's Gift of Ten Words 5*

By
The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Mark 14:66-15:5

⁶⁶While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. ⁶⁷When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, "You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth." ⁶⁸But he denied it, saying, "I do not know or understand what you are talking about." And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed. ⁶⁹And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." ⁷⁰But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean." ⁷¹But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know this man you are talking about." ⁷²At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.

¹⁵As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. ²Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” He answered him, “You say so.” ³Then the chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴Pilate asked him again, “Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.” ⁵But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

Exodus 20:14-21

¹⁴You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵You shall not steal.

¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

¹⁸When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, ¹⁹and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.”

²⁰Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.”

²¹Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

The journal, *Nature*, recently featured an article entitled “The Illusion of Moral Decline.” It began: “The social fabric appears to be unravelling: civility seems like an old-fashioned habit, honesty like an optional exercise and trust like a relic of another time.” Then the article quoted one scholarly observer of human culture who wrote, “The process of our decline began with the sinking of moral foundations which brought us finally to the dark dawning of our modern day, in which we can neither bear our immoralities nor face the remedies needed to cure them.” Sounds like the introductory chapter of a book by David Brooks or an op-ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal*. Curiously, as apt as this description of our times may seem, it was written more than two thousand years ago by the historian Livy, who was bemoaning the declining morality of his fellow Roman citizens! Over time people’s treatment of each other, which ranges from altruistic to barbaric, is a concern in every generation throughout history.

The study published under this heading: “The Illusion of Moral Decline” showed that most people - across nations - believe morality has declined, and most people believe it began somewhere around the time they were born and continues to this day. The study also found that most of us believe that the people we know personally are exceptions to this rule. Seventy-six percent of Americans agree that addressing the moral breakdown of the country should be a high priority of the government; and yet, most Americans also think the government should not fund resources to address well-documented problems from climate change and gun violence to racial injustice and economic inequality. We seem to be caught up, according to the psychologists who conducted this study, in an existential tension between a concern about moral decline and the inability to address it proactively.¹

These weeks during Lent of considering the Ten Commandments have helped us think about how God’s intention for human morality is deeply rooted in our religious tradition. The roots of this tradition go all the way

¹ “The Illusion of Moral Decline,” *Nature*, July 2023.

back to the Exodus when God freed the ancient Hebrews from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. These Ten Words were never intended to put a heavy burden upon God's covenant community. Instead, they were gifts for their newfound freedom. They are an affirmation that God helps us to be obedient and faithful people in order to keep and maintain our freedom. Because God is creative, faithful and just, we are given these commandments to help us also be creative, faithful and just to enable the freedom of others.

Unpacking the meaning of these ancient words and making them applicable to today's reality is a challenge. But – as we know – the Exodus is still happening. God still hears the suffering of people, and is working to bring them into the abundant life of liberation. So these words will always be worth pondering, holding close to our heart, and guiding our lives of faithfulness.

As we have heard, over these last five Sundays, the Ten Words are interconnected. We began with the Words about Loving God – worshipping God alone, not turning toward other lesser gods, never using the powerful name of God in any vain or meaningless way. We crossed a bridge with the next three commandments that called for worship of God to turn us toward neighbor. Keeping Sabbath, for ourselves and for others, honoring our parents who brought us to life when they age into needing our care, and respecting God as the Giver of Life by not taking the life of another.

Today, these last four commandments locate us firmly in the realm of Loving Neighbor. Addressing our moral responsibility to each other, each falls under the rubric of stealing. Committing adultery steals away from faithfulness and trust of a spouse as well as from neighbor. Stealing another's property eats away at civil community. To bear false witness is a way of stealing another's truth. Especially in a court of law, where bearing false witness could end the life of another. That's where we find the disciple Peter in the gospel reading, denying Jesus on his way to

the cross while saving himself. The final commandment warns us not to covet. Which, in a sense, circles us back to the beginning to remember who God is. The opposite of coveting is to be content. The command not to covet goods belonging to one's neighbor points back to the beginning Word about God the Giver of life and freedom.²

My old friend and theologian, Al Winn arrived at this last commandment writing, these are “God’s promises. God’s dreams of what human community can be like. God dreams of a community where there is no murder, but rather profound respect for human life; a community where there is no adultery, but rather commitment and faithfulness; a community where there is no stealing but rather generosity; a community where there is no lying, but rather truthfulness. Now the final dream: a community where there is no coveting, but rather contentment.” This last commandment may seem to move us from external behavior to internal feelings. But biblical scholars tell us the Hebrew word covet involves not only desire for something that is rightfully our neighbor’s, but includes the planning and scheming and trying to get it. Coveting is the enemy of peace. We cannot know the peace God intends if our hearts are eaten up with the desire for things that are not ours. Al Winn sums up the importance of the Ten Words saying, “God’s dream is of a world where people are more concerned with their neighbor’s good than with their goods.”³

That is the essence of God’s gift of freedom. That is true freedom. Now, we may not be tempted to steal things from our neighbors – whether the affection of another’s spouse, or property, or their truth. We may never find ourselves wishing we had what our neighbor has. In a word, we may not be habitually breaking these commandments when it comes to their basic interpretation that was handed down from God to Moses. However, while the address of these last commandments is individual, they do not concern private welfare. Their focus is to serve the life and

² P. 7 - Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, Interpretation commentary, p. 406.

³ Albert Curry Winn, *A Christian Primer*, p.250-256.

health of the community, to which the individual plays an important role. When we have more than enough, our keeping these commandments is to work for the freedom and abundant life of our neighbors.

Matthew Dicks is an elementary school teacher turned novelist. He grew up in poverty but did not know that he was *poor* until he got to Mrs. Laverne's fourth grade class and he was the only kid who got a free lunch. Once he realized that he was poor, his top priority became hiding the fact. "All you want to do when you're poor like that," he said, "is not to let anyone else know. Interestingly, he did not seem to covet what other kids in the class had. He found it fun to develop strategies to hide his poverty. For example, when the Boy Scouts went camping he carried newspapers along to pad his sleeping bag that was never warm enough. "It wasn't so bad," he said. "I viewed poverty as an adventure. It was a challenge. I was constantly trying to figure out a way to get through with what I had and to succeed."

Until one day, Matthew and his friend Peter were riding bicycles back to Matthew's house after school. They had liked to ride bikes together and engage in friendly competitions, racing side by side. But one day was different, because Peter had just gotten a new 10-speed bike. Matthew still had his old, rusty Huffy that probably weighed sixty pounds. As the two friends raced home, Peter easily pulled ahead and within seconds had a fifty-yard lead. Matthew dug in and started pedaling harder and harder than he ever had before, his heart pounding in his chest, while Peter didn't seem to be trying all that hard, but was beating him handily, barely breaking a sweat. "Up until that point," Matthew said, "I had had this idealized version of life, where effort, intelligence, creativity and hard work will always overcome whatever material lacking you might have, whatever money you're lacking. But as I watched Peter go away, I realized that my problem was money. I was never going to own a ten-speed bike, and I was never going to catch Peter again."⁴

⁴ Peter Bynum, *Journal for Preachers*, Advent, 2019, p. 33.

Friends, I think it is safe to say that we at Bryn Mawr are generally a 10-speed bike kind of congregation. We have been blessed with privilege and resources that have helped us get ahead, while we have easily passed by people who began with unfair disadvantage, whose circumstances are less than the abundant life God intends for all God's children. God gives us these Ten Words as if to say: "I have set you free. You may forget that. So here are some gifts to help you remember. They will challenge your imagination to realize that I am a God of abundance, who gives you more than enough, who in Jesus gives you more love and forgiveness that you could ever imagine. Don't waste your life wanting another life."⁵ Don't waste your life wanting another life. Then, we receive these gifts, and respond to God saying, "You are indeed the God who hears the cries of suffering people, and you are forever delivering human beings from bondage. May these commandments be to us a gift and never a burden. May they become our vocation as human beings from sabbath to sabbath, from day to day. May they remind us that you are gracious; and we have everything we need. So now, may we use these gifts to help others be free."

AMEN.

⁵ Sam Wells, "One is Plenty," Duke Chapel, Oct. 2, 2005.