

THE OPPOSITE OF STEALING

Scriptures: Matthew 19:16-26; Leviticus 19:9-16

In many respects Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is like a sermon on the Ten Commandments. Take a pew Bible and turn to Matthew, chapter 5, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount (NT, p. 4). In verse 17 Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill." Then Jesus begins a sermon on three of the Ten Commandments. Look at verse 21: "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...." Notice how Jesus takes the negative command and pushes it further. Not only does he prohibit murder, he prohibits anger and name-calling. But that is not all. Look at verse 23-24:

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

When I was young I thought I was doing pretty well not to kill my brother. But apparently that is not good enough for Jesus. Jesus wants us to be reconciled with each other. The command "You shall not kill" carries with it an opposite positive meaning. The opposite of killing is caring.

Now look at the next paragraph starting at verse 27. Jesus 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." Once again Jesus takes the negative commandment and pushes it further. It isn't enough to avoid adultery. Jesus wants us to avoid pornography or anything else that encourages us to look at people as objects of our lust. But that isn't all. In the next paragraph Jesus talks about marriage. Why? Because the opposite of adultery is faithfulness, and faithfulness is part of what it means to keep the seventh commandment.

The next paragraph, starting at verse 33 deals with truthfulness, which is the opposite of the ninth commandment: "You shall not bear false witness." I will talk about that next week. Finally, notice how the whole chapter concludes in verse 48. Jesus says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." In Greek and Hebrew thought, to be perfect does not mean to be flawless. It means to fulfill your purpose. A tool is perfect not when it is without nicks or flaws but when it does the job for which it was fashioned, when it fulfills its purpose. In the same way people are perfect not when they are without flaws but when they fulfill the purpose for which God created them. To be perfect it is not enough to avoid killing, committing adultery, or lying. You must also be caring, faithful, and honest.

With that in mind, turn to our second scripture lesson from Matthew 19 (NT, p. 21). In verse 16, a young man says to Jesus, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus answers by reminding him of the Ten Commandments—verse 18: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness."

Now here is the surprise. In verse 20 the man says to Jesus, “I have kept all these, what do I still lack?” It would probably shock us to hear someone say, “I have kept all of the commandments,” but if you look only at the negative side of the Ten Commandments, it is not that hard. Basically the man is saying, “I haven’t murdered anyone. I haven’t cheated on my wife. I haven’t stolen anything or lied on the witness stand.” Why do I need to be forgiven?”

When I was a pastor in Potlatch, Idaho, I became friends with a guy who worked for the US Forest Service. (By the way, do you know why I tell stories about Potlatch? Because I don’t live there anymore. If I ever leave Spokane I have stories to tell for the next 20 years.) This man from Potlatch had a wife who was a member of the church, but he never came himself, not even at Christmas or Easter. But he was a wonderful person—a hard worker, a faithful husband, a good father, and helped out with many needs in the community. I asked him one time why he never came to church. He shrugged and said, “I guess I just don’t feel like a sinner.”

The young man in our scripture reading felt the same way. “I have kept all these commandments,” he says. “I haven’t killed anyone, stolen anything, lied or cheated on my wife. Why do I need to go to church?” It is a good question.

In verse 21 Jesus says, “If you wish to be perfect...” Let’s stop there a minute. Do you remember what I said earlier about being perfect? To be perfect does not mean to be without flaws; it means to fulfill the purpose for which you were created. Basically Jesus is telling the man, “If you want to be perfect, if you want to fulfill the purpose for which you were created, it isn’t enough to keep the negative commandments, you must also fulfill their positive opposite.”

To illustrate, Jesus picks on the eighth commandment: “You shall not steal.” The man has already said, “I have kept all the commandments. I haven’t stolen anything.” But Jesus says to the man, “If you would be perfect, if you want to fulfill the purpose for which you were created, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor; then come, follow me.”

Can you now guess the opposite of stealing? The opposite of stealing is sharing! It’s great if you haven’t committed robbery. It is even nice if you haven’t downloaded illegal movies or music from the internet. But you still have not fulfilled your purpose in life. God did not create you and put you on this earth just to avoid ripping people off. God put you here to care for people. If you are a hard worker and an honest business person, great! Good for you! But the real question is what you are doing with what you have? Are you fulfilling the purpose for which you were given all these things?

There is another striking interpretation of the eighth commandment in our first scripture lesson. Turn to Leviticus 19 (OT, p. 106), and look at verse 13. It says, “You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.” That is the negative side of the command. Don’t steal like a bank robber, and don’t steal like a crooked accountant. But that is not the whole story. Look at verses 9-10:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or

gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien:
I am the Lord your God.

Yes, it is important not to steal from people or defraud people, but that does not fulfill our whole purpose for being here. We were created to care for other people and for God's creation, and if we don't use some of your resources to do that, we are missing the point.

As I have mentioned before, our church has a policy of giving 20% of its pledges to mission outside our church. Some of it goes to mission projects right here in Spokane, like the Union Gospel Mission, the House of Charity, the Foodbank, and the Liberty Park Child Development Center. Another part of our 20% of pledges goes to the mission of our Presbytery in the Inland Northwest: things like Camp Spalding, the new Latah Valley Church, and the support of small, struggling churches in our Presbytery. And some of that 20% goes to the worldwide mission of the Presbyterian Church.

When I was young and did not want to eat all the asparagus on my plate, my parents told me the same thing that parents have said for generations. They said, "Think of all the starving children in Africa who would be glad to have that food." My response was "Send it to them; let them have it." I gladly would have given my asparagus to the hungry children of Africa, if I could.

Well here is the good news. You can. You can share your food with hungry people all over the world. You can't actually put some on a plate and send it to Africa. But the Presbyterian Church has a network of missionaries and partner churches on every continent of our globe, except Antarctica, and if it keeps warming up we may try to start a new church there, too. We have a network of pastors and missionaries all over the world, and when we give some of our pledge money to the worldwide mission of the Presbyterian Church, it goes not to governments, not to expensively financed relief organizations, but to actual churches and mission partners who personally oversee its use for people in need.

The Ten Commandments are not just about what you *don't* do. Each of the commandments has a positive opposite. The opposite of killing is caring, the opposite of adultery is faithfulness, and the opposite of stealing is sharing. Those are the positive purposes for which God put you here.

- Ken Onstot
October 28, 2007