

LORD

Our fall discipleship series focuses on the Ten Commandments. Not only what they teach us not to do, but what to do. Jesus is Savior and Lord. Once we know Him as Savior, it's time to begin to allow His lordship in every corner of our lives. I can easily recognize Jesus as "Lord" in some abstract way. He's Lord of the universe. He's Lord of all history. But it gets harder when I think about His lordship in my own life. Is He really my master when I'm thinking about my relationships with my family? Is Jesus my first consult and guide when I'm arranging my finances? So much of discipleship is simply about loving Jesus more—more than desires of the flesh, more than money, more than what my neighbor has. The Ten Commandments are a great measure of our hearts. Do we love Jesus more than these? Jesus is Lord.

At my last church in Atlanta, a friend came up to me at the back door after worship and said, “Pastor, if you keep preaching like that, I’ll have to buy some steel-toed boots.” Now, even though my family roots are in Knoxville, sometimes I would get lost with my deep-south friends, so I said, “Mike, you’re just going to have to tell me what that means.” He said, “When you preach like that, you’re stepping on my toes!” After that, every now and then he’d just walk by me and shake his head, “My toes are sore, pastor.” In the preaching office, it is not my job to protect all the toes. In fact, up here in the pulpit, it is my primary job to tell you what is in this Book. Or, more accurately, to receive with you what is in this Book, to take it in right here in front of you as we wrestle with it together and allow the Word of God to do its work in our lives. It’s not always comfortable. Sometimes the truth of Scripture feels like a long, cool drink of water. Other times it feels a little like your soul is on the anvil and you wonder how many blows it will take to bring your life to shape.

As we round the corner to the back half of the Ten Commandments, we get murder, adultery, theft, lying and envy. That’s a lot to look forward to! Makes me question the wisdom of this planning this series when we are trying to break into a growth pattern around here. It might feel like a good time to take a few weeks off! But God is good, and His truth is good; it is even beautiful. As the Word speaks to us, we will also know the grace and mercy of forgiveness. Remember, even as these commandments give us a guide to virtue, they are ultimately here to drive us to repentance, to make us hit our knees and call out to Jesus. Every one of them is beyond us, but Christ has satisfied them all and calls us to forgiveness. His mercy leads to repentance, and faith in Him leads to new life. The sixth commandment is this: “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13). Two words in Hebrew. Don’t murder. Easy. I’ve already had some people express disappointment on one of the first five commandments saying, “Darn it, Tim. That’s the only one I thought I had in the bag!” Two words: don’t murder. We’ll see how we do, won’t we?

What is the value of a human life? What is life worth? It would seem very easy to avoid breaking this commandment, just honor human life. It is a command against homicide, not against “killing” exactly. There is another word in Hebrew for killing, but this is the word for murder—homicide, intentional or unintentional. This is important to note as soldiers and police officers and others are in positions where the use of force is necessary to protect others or promote peace; a soldier fulfilling his or her duty to use force to stop a defined enemy is not breaking this commandment even if the

enemy must be killed. But, then again, it is possible for a soldier to commit murder; it is possible for a police officer to commit murder. Extreme care must be taken with the use of force, particularly when a life is at stake.

What is the value of a human life, and who gets to decide? Is one life taken to defend ten lives a worthy sacrifice? How about ten thousand lives taken to save one hundred thousand? Do we trade life for life? Montana State University held a convocation to kick off the year with all the new students, my son Jack being one, and the speaker was a famous ethicist from the East Coast. His talk was fun because he raised moral questions then allowed the students to debate each other, in a crowd of thousands. He asked, if you were in San Francisco and saw a runaway trolley headed toward a dozen workers fixing the tracks, would you jump in front of it to stop it? Most said yes. It was virtuous to spend one life to save twelve. Then he asked, “What if you were too small to stop a trolley, but the man standing next to you was much larger and would probably stop it—would you push him?” One life for many. Same principle isn’t it? Boy it was interesting to see five hundred 18-year-olds debate that one. What is a life? Why is it valuable? Why are 12 lives more valuable than one? Why is my life more or less valuable than the man next to me? What it revealed to me, as a pastor, is that once we have lost our foundations in Scripture we are simply building castles in the sky, made up of anecdotes and opinions and how it makes us feel. We who seek to follow Christ must make every effort to come to terms with what God has taught us in His Word. The act of murderously taking another life is an affront to God, who made all people, all people regardless of position or place, regardless of race or nationality, regardless of wealth or poverty, all people—God made all people in His image, bearing His likeness, and so all people carry on that basis a fundamental human and divine right to life. What’s the value of a life? God gets to say.

When does life begin? Does such a right pertain to an unborn child? People sure disagree on this issue, and our culture has taken a certain direction. The Bible shows us a God who has regard for the unborn child. God addresses the unborn. He says to Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart” (Jeremiah 1:5). The same with David in Psalm 139. Jesus and John leapt for joy while they were still in Mary and Elizabeth’s bellies when they visited each other. Exodus 21 mandates retribution against anyone who injures a pregnant woman’s unborn child. Our culture has taken a different approach. It can be very painful to realize after decisions have been made and courses of action taken in

crisis that God's perspective may have been different than you realized at the time. There is grace. There is forgiveness. There is mercy leading us to repentance.

When does life end? The incredible advances of the medical community can keep a heart beating, keep oxygen moving, keep biological systems going, for weeks and even months. Is lying in a bed sustained by machines *life*? Things get confusing here. I've been part of more of these conversations than you can imagine. I encourage you to have healthy, open discussions with family members about your wishes for your final days. I'm a pretty practical person; it comes down to brass tacks for me—I'd rather pass whatever money the Lord has given me to my children and grandchildren and church than see it all go to so-and-so medical group for keeping me breathing in an unconscious stupor for weeks on end. But boy, do those decisions get difficult when the time comes. Honor life. Respect life. Be careful. Be thoughtful. Be prayerful. This is what the sixth commandment requires. Our network of churches has a doctrinal statement for all officers called the *Essential Tenets* and it says the sixth commandment means to "recognize and honor the image of God in every human being from conception to natural death" (*Essential Tenets*, ECO). Be careful to honor life. It isn't only about intent to kill, but also about death by negligence and carelessness. Life is precious and valuable, if not to you it is certainly precious to God.

Well, if you've emerged unscathed by all that, just turn to Matthew where our Lord takes it up. Jesus doesn't relieve the requirements of respect for life, He doubles down. "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" (Matthew 5:21-22). For Jesus, it doesn't stop at homicide. It isn't just manslaughter, voluntary or involuntary. It's anger in the heart. It's a passing insult. A harsh word you may have thought little of, but that made someone around you to feel less than human, less than worthy of the same life you have. Jesus gets down to the heart, your heart, where the impulse to destroy life actually begins at the root. He gets to the seeds of it.

Now we are starting to see what the commandment standard really is. The *Heidelberg Catechism* (an important document for our doctrine here at First Pres) says this commandment isn't just "don't murder," it is: "That I am not to abuse, hate, injure, or kill my neighbor, either with thought, or by word or gesture, much less by deed, whether by myself or through another,

but to lay aside all desire for revenge; and that I do not harm myself or willfully expose myself to danger. This is why the authorities are armed with the means to prevent murder ... In forbidding murder God means to teach us that he abhors the root of murder, which is envy, hatred, anger, and desire for revenge, and that he regards all these as hidden murder. Is it enough, then, if we do not kill our neighbor in any of these ways? No; for when God condemns envy, hatred, and anger, he requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves, to show patience, peace, gentleness, mercy, and friendliness toward him, to prevent injury to him as much as we can, also to do good to our enemies." The holiness God requires should push you to need a Savior. Still unscathed? Really?

We are entertained by murder and death. Our movies and TV shows and video games are full of it. After the Columbine shooting, a lot of attention was given to violence on TV and in video games. Then over the next twenty years they only increased. It was only a few years later that a company that makes realistic corpses for Hollywood reported it could not keep up with demand. In 2018, the American Psychiatric Association reports that by age 18, a U.S. youth will have viewed on screens 16,000 simulated murders and 200,000 acts of violence. All kinds of studies reveal links between exposure to violence and increased aggression in children. I'm not trying to be a downer. My kids play the same games yours do! But we should sure try to help our kids understand what is at stake. It doesn't feel like we've got the spirit of this commandment going very well, does it? How about a company that profits from selling known carcinogens or dumps life-threatening chemicals into water tables? How about callousness toward refugees in their desperation, cast out of their own cities and nations by violence and looking for hope? You've got the murderous killers out there, ISIS and Al Qaeda and the like, and they must be stopped. But how might you and I be unwittingly participating in the disregard for and loss of human life? None of us emerges unscathed. Even from this one! "Man, pastor. I thought I'd at least have this one in the bag!" Lord help!

Our way forward is to have Jesus lead us out. Jesus is Lord of our relationships—at every moment. If Jesus says a passing word, a harsh word or thought is a seed of anger and murder in the human heart, well what if I submit my every word, thought, gesture to Jesus? Can He guide me? What if I include Jesus in every conversation? You know how you say some things in front of some people, but you'd never say some things in front of other people? What if Jesus is in the conversation? I'm going to need a lot of help here. This is going to take divine intervention. But here's the promise: if you

are in Christ, He will send His Holy Spirit into your heart to guide and prompt your conscience. The Holy Spirit within you will begin to speak to you, if you will listen. The only way forward here is to allow the Lord to be Lord of every relationship. Is Jesus there in your conversation? If a word can be a curse, do you know too that a word can be a blessing? A good word can have eternal healing effect. That's why we need the Lord to be Lord of our relationships, because if He is not a constant presence, if I don't learn to listen to the Spirit of God and His prompts even as I'm listening and conversing with my friend, I'll be utterly lost.

Jesus is our guide. He is worthy to be because Jesus knows what it means to be on the receiving end of human hatred. Jesus knows what it is to be murdered. When Jesus was being delivered up to be killed the Roman governor Pontius Pilate tried to appease the people by torturing Jesus publicly, but the crowd wanted death. In Matthew, we read "When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility!' All the people answered, 'His blood is on us and on our children!'" (Matthew 27:24-25). We will be responsible for killing him. Peter stood at Solomon's Colonnade and said, "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this" (Acts 3:13-15).

What does it mean that Jesus bore our sins? Like a sponge soaking up "sin" in some abstract way? Yes, but He also received our sin in His flesh. He bore our sin. He received human hatred and human rebellion and human destruction of life itself. He bore our sin in the form of blows and whippings and spit and nails. By His stripes we are healed. He is eternally the murdered one and He rose again over it all. Now, because of that, anything we have ever done to fail to live up to God's value of life, anything we have ever done or thought of doing to fall short of His holiness, any single thing we have done to break this commandment—it can be forgiven. Christ has paid the price. It can be forgiven, and we can follow the Lord of our relationships to never again be life-takers but to become, like Him, true life-givers.

STUDY GUIDE

LORD • EXODUS 20:13, MATTHEW 5:21–26

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in God's Word

Read aloud the passages for the week: Exodus 20:13 and Matthew 5:21–26. Silently reflect on what you heard. Underline phrases that seem meaningful.

- Re-read Exodus 20:13. Israel was dehumanized and enslaved in Egyptian captivity for generations. In these commands, God was teaching His people how to be human again. What does this command communicate about what it means to be human?
- Historically, most cultures have had laws against murder. What makes this command so good for societies and so universally accepted?
- Re-read Matthew 5:21–26. Jesus seems to raise the bar with His words here. How are Jesus's words an appropriate application of Exodus 20:13 and how does He push beyond the commandment?
- News shows feature outraged commentators, drivers on the road expressing their anger in very clear ways, even Facebook friends are posting antagonistically! How are we supposed to function in an angry world? Is it enough to only be cognizant of our own emotions?
- Read Ephesians 4:26. Where is the line between non-sinful and sinful anger? How does one surrender anger before the sun goes down?
- Jesus advocates leaving a gift at the foot of the altar in order to be reconciled to someone. Is there anyone who you need to be reconciled to right now? What is **OUT:** stopping you from pursuing that reconciliation?

Connect With the World Around Us by Joining God in God's Mission

CityServe is on October 6. Decide today whether your will serve at a site. If you are not able to serve, maybe you can donate items for service projects we are host-

IN: Visit www.first-pres.org/cityserve for details.

Connect With the Family of God

Consider the people you named in the final question. Pray for them by name. Contact them or write them a letter in an effort to reconcile.