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Exodus 19:1-6, 17-20; Exodus 20:1-20; Exodus 24:3-4,9-12,15,18

Deuteronomy 5:6-21

Today, we are continuing the 2-part miniseries on the Ten Words. Last week, we talked about the way that the Ten Words – also known as the Ten Commandments, or the Ten Statements – are sometimes divided into two parts – God’s relationship with humanity, and our relationship with each other. The first three words, in plain English, are: Worship only God. Think before using God’s name. Keep Sabbath, and give rest to all in your power.

These ten words are unique among covenants with humanity in the Bible, because they are the only ones described as having been not just given by God, but written by God directly on tablets of stone. First, according to Exodus 19 and 24, Moses hears the Words and more from God, brings them to the Hebrew people, and returns with the collective will to agree to the covenant. Then, seventy-four leaders of the people – elders of the tribes – go up, and see God’s feet, resting on a floor of Lapis Lazuli – the bluest stone known in the ancient world, something like the stone on the bulletin cover this morning. Moses is called before God, ascending into the cloud, and the people are left below for forty days, after already agreeing to the covenant. That’s when Moses returns to find them worshipping a golden calf idol, and throws down the stones that God provided him, shattering them on the ground, representing the fact that the covenant had already been broken. But God calls him up again, and he returns with the stones containing the essence of the covenant, the ten words. Jewish tradition states that the stones were from the foundation of God’s throne, made of the bright blue lapis lazuli, the color of the sky itself. This is why the tassels on Jewish prayer robes are blue – to remind the people of the blue stone of the covenant. It’s why Lapis Lazuli was part of the garments worn by the chief priests. And it’s why the flag of Israel today uses sky blue as part of its design.

With that background, let’s turn to the fourth of the words written on the tablet: “Honor your father and your mother, exactly as the Lord your God requires, so that your life will be long and so that things will go well for you on the fertile

land that the Lord your God is giving you.” I wanted to read out the whole text, as it’s often just summarized “honor your father and your mother” as though the connection back to God, long life, and the land is just incidental. Like the previous statement (for Sabbath), God provides the reasoning behind this one – honor those who have gone before you to show honor to God, and to make things better for you going forward.

Number four, then, is a cross-over Word – a transition from relationship with God to relationship with each other. In honoring your parents, you show that you are willing to keep the covenant that God is establishing. It is, in essence, a call to gratitude – to show thankfulness for those that have raised you, supporting them in turn when they need it. It is a reminder that the blessed ties that bind us together should begin with family – and it’s also why the genealogies appear throughout the Bible. Being able to trace your family back was a way of showing honor, and recognizing your place in the world as a part of God’s chosen people.

Now, about the word “honor” – in Hebrew, this word is *kavod*, the same word used for glory. But, it’s meaning is more direct – it means give weight to, like a thick woolen robe gives weight to the person bearing it. Glory and honor are recognition of the weight or burden of those who have lived long lives and carry the experiences with them. The elders of the families and tribes of Israel were chosen based on the weight of their experiences – often the eldest in the tribe would fill the role, but actual age wasn’t the most important consideration. The fourth Word, then, is about taking what your parents say with the proper weight – they won’t always be right, of course, but they’re right more often than kids tend to think! In honoring your parents, and teaching your children to honor their parents, the mantle of wisdom gains weight and continues to pass on through the generations, adding to the long life of all to follow. And ultimately, it is God’s great gift, of wisdom handed down, that allows the land to be worked properly and productively.

Give weight to what your parents say, and continue to pass the wisdom on. Great! Now, we’re into the words that actually are single words in Hebrew. These three words are Murder, Adulter, and Steal – and all carry the prefix of negation, *lo*

– becoming not-murder, not-adulter, not-steal. And yes, “adulter” is a single word and concept, rather than the cumbersome, “commit adultery” that we have in English. Unlike every Word before, there’s no explanation for these. They are meant to stand on their own, with recognition of their importance.

But, we run into a problem of translation, again. In English, “murder” has a connotation of premeditated, illegal killing. The Hebrew word here, *ratsach*, has a much wider range of meaning. It comes from a root word that means “dash to pieces,” and it is used for violence of humans against each other – whether intentional or not, and whether or not the violence has been sanctioned by law, as in an execution. So, execution, manslaughter, and murder – all in a single word. It’s clear that the ancient Hebrew people also struggled with this – what does it mean to be called to war? To accidental death? Wrestling with the interpretation is something that we must continue to do today – but I tend to prefer “not-murder” as the intention here. Not killing each other, I think we can agree, is a good rule to live by.

In contrast, not-adulter and not-steal are pretty straightforward. Together with non-murder, these three words are about the *actions* we should not take. Don’t murder, don’t cheat on your spouse, or cause another’s spouse to be unfaithful, and don’t take what isn’t yours. The last of these, not-steal has another component in Hebrew that is missing in English – it also means “not-deceive.” Don’t take what doesn’t belong to you, yes, not even by deception.

That provides a great transition into the next Word – don’t bear false witness, as it’s traditionally rendered. A more literal reading would be, “do not respond with evil testimony against your neighbor.” This includes both making up a lie in court – the way we tend to think of bearing witness – but also the sense of don’t lie to your neighbor outside of court, too. Don’t speak evil words is my summary of this one, hopefully getting both senses together.

Give weight to your parents, and carry on their wisdom. Never participate in murder, adultery, or theft and deception. Don’t speak evil words.

That leaves us with two more to go – and these are more delicate. Now,

instead of the actions and words, we're dealing with sin of the heart and mind.

“Don't covet your neighbor's wife and don't covet your neighbor's house or field, or servants, or ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” I'm going to deal with these two words separately, but make this note first: in Deuteronomy, the words for coveting of a neighbor's spouse and coveting a neighbor's things are different words. Even in the ancient world, the difference between people and things was clear. But we'll come back to that in a moment – first, let's talk about coveting.

Covet is an interesting word – we understand it, I think, as related to want or desire, but it's rare that we use it in everyday conversation. Wanting and desiring something are a part of being human, though – we want and desire all sorts of things, and that's not a bad thing, nor is it against the covenant. We might want to eat food, or want a place to live, or want a meaningful relationship. We might desire to change the way we look or feel, or a better job, or time away from the daily grind. But coveting goes beyond desire or want. It's not seeing a neighbor's new car, and thinking, “Hey, I really like that EV – I want to get one myself!” Instead, coveting is an intense, unchecked and envious desire for something specific that belongs to someone else. It often comes with a sense of entitlement and disregard for rights, feelings, or possessions of others.

Instead of “I want to get one like that for myself,” coveting would be thoughts like, “I want THAT exact car, and I'll do whatever it takes to have it, even if it means taking it from my neighbor.”

Not surprisingly, coveting something is a very bad idea. In many cases of theft, the criminal had been stewing over the specific object for some time, cultivating an internal sense where taking the thing was justified, because the criminal thought it “would be better taken care of” by themselves. The Word against coveting things is a warning against cultivating that depth of desire – recognizing it as a trap, and being able to turn your thoughts in a different direction.

Now, I mentioned that Deuteronomy uses two different words for covet in these two of the ten Words. It's a subtle distinction, but the Hebrew for coveting a neighbor's things means something like, “desire to take possession of” whereas the

Hebrew for coveting a neighbor's spouse is closer to "desire to take delight or pleasure in." Some versions render this as "lust after" – which is fine in this context, but falls apart when the same word is used in Proverbs 1:22 – "and the scoffers *delight* themselves in scoffing" or in Song of Songs 2:3 – "in his shade, I took great delight and sat down."

Add to this that, of course, there is no gender-neutral word for "spouse" in ancient Hebrew, so the Hebrew reads *eshet*, meaning woman or wife. However, the implication is clear – no matter the genders involved, "don't crave delight with your neighbor's spouse".

Worship only God. Think before using God's name. Keep Sabbath, and give rest to all in your power. Give weight to your parents, and carry on their wisdom. Never participate in murder, adultery, or theft and deception. Don't speak evil words. Don't crave delight with your neighbor's spouse. Don't covet what your neighbor has.

As we reflect on these Ten Words, we see how they form the framework for a life of righteousness, compassion, and reverence for God. They guide us in navigating our relationship with the Divine and with one another. Through these commandments, we're reminded of the weight of our actions, the importance of gratitude, and the value of wisdom passed down through generations.

May we carry the wisdom of these commandments in our hearts, living them out in our daily interactions. Let us honor our parents, respect one another's lives and property, speak truth and guard against envy. In doing so, we not only honor the covenant with God, but also contribute to the flourishing of our communities.

May the Ten Words be a beacon, illuminating our path toward a life lived in accordance with God's gracious plan. May we find strength we need to love and serve one another, thus fulfilling the sacred covenant between God and humanity. Amen.