

Positive Negatives
Exodus 20:13-21
Series: Book of Exodus [#16]
Pastor Lyle L. Wahl
August 16, 2009

Introduction

Sometimes people complain that the Ten Commandments are too negative — “You shall *not* do this. You shall *not* do that.” “What we need,” some say, “is a positive message.” I can understand some of that. In fact, there are positive truths in each one of the Ten Commandments. For example, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain,” can be stated positively, “Always respect the LORD your God in how you use His name.”

But much of the criticism comes because we don’t want to be told “*No*. You *can’t* do this. You *can’t* do that.” Yet, every parent, every person in authority knows that negative statements are needed for clarity and effectiveness. Parents tell their children “Don’t touch a hot stove.” “Don’t play in the street.” “Don’t go anywhere with strangers.” These are negative, but needed and clear commands.

Then there are some who pursue this positive idea with an entirely different agenda. Francis McNab, of St. Michael’s Uniting Church in Australia, makes no claim of supporting historical orthodox Christianity. He basically has made up his own religion using the trappings of Christianity.

He states that Abraham probably did not really exist, that Moses was a mass murderer and that Jesus Christ was just a Jewish peasant who certainly was not God. In fact, he asserts, there is no God in the usual sense of a supreme being who intervenes in our world and lives.¹ As well, the Bible’s Ten Commandments are, apparently, too negative and outdated for him. He has his own ten commandments. His first commandment is “Believe in a Good Presence in your life. Call the Good Presence: God. G–D—and follow that Good presence so that you live life fully —tolerantly, collaboratively, generously and with dignity.”²

Eight of the Ten Commandments, all but Commandments Four and Five, are stated as universal negatives. They are negatives, but they are *Positive Negatives*. We will explore some of that as we look at Commandments Six through Ten and Israel’s response to God’s appearing and speaking these words to them.

Commandments Six Through Ten.

The Sixth Commandment: “You shall not murder.” Many of us are familiar with the King James Version’s “Thou shalt not kill.” Newer versions replace *kill* with *murder* because the word used here is not a broad term for taking life, but for wrongful taking of life. For example, it was not used to describe killing in warfare, nor was it used for the judicial act of capital punishment. It was used to describe both premeditated murder and what we refer to as manslaughter, or wrongful taking of life that is not premeditated.

This was not a new principle. God condemned the first murder when Cain killed his brother Able, recorded in Genesis 4. The penalty for murder under the Law is found in chapter 21. Verse 12,

“He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death. But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint you a place to which he may flee. If, however, a man acts presumptuously toward his neighbor, so as to kill him craftily, you are to take him even from My altar, that he may die” (12-14).

This penalty for murder was not new with the Law. After the flood God told Noah, “Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man” (Genesis 9:6). Murder is wrong because God created us in His image. As individuals we do not have the right to kill anyone based on our own judgment or feelings.

This prohibition of murder based on the sanctity of life continues in the New Testament. Jesus accepted and broadened its application. In Matthew 5 He said

“You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.”

(21-22)

The apostle John makes the same point, “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (1 John 3:15).

You see, I cannot just say “I have never killed anyone and am sure I never will,” and so move on to the next commandment. This commandment is based on the sanctity of human life and respect for every person because he or she has been created in the image of God. It does not matter how sinful or repulsive the person is. Anything short of this respect tears down, destroys that person. It is interesting that a word derived from this term *murder*, means to *shatter*. The Psalmist wrote,

“I will say to God my rock, ‘Why have You forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?’ As a *shattering* [that’s the word] of my bones, my adversaries revile me, while they say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’” (Psalm 42:9-10).

Their cruel words shattered, devastated him. We too have been shattered by cruel words. And, when *we* dish out those kinds of attitudes, words and actions, we are breaking the Sixth Commandment, “You shall not kill.”

The Seventh Commandment: “You shall not commit adultery.” This commandment flows from God’s standard of a life-long, exclusive marriage relationship that goes back to

creation. Genesis 2:24, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.” God has never modified this standard. It was, is and will be essential to holiness and to building strong, healthy marriages, families and societies. The penalty for breaking this commandment in Israel under the Law was death (cf. Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22).

Jesus made the life-long, exclusive standard clear in Matthew 19, to which His disciples replied, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry” (10). They understood their own natural, weak, sinful nature. As with murder, Jesus makes it clear that adultery is more than the physical act. In Matthew 5 He said,

“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 for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (27-28).

The *original sin* here, if you will, is in the heart, as Jesus tells us in Matthew 15:19, “out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders.” Taking this command lightly, seeing it as old fashioned, unenlightened, too restrictive, is leaving a huge swath of devastation and death in marriage relationships, children and extended families.

The Eighth Commandment: “You shall not steal.” Stealing is taking something you don’t own and don’t have a right to take. God gave Israel a number of specific laws about this, such as ahead here in Exodus 22:1-15.

You may have heard about surveys which show many people steal from their employers, everything from paper clips and paper to photocopiers. This continues, but let’s update it a bit. One survey found that 59% of employees admitted to stealing data from their company when they left their position—e-mail, electronic and hard copy files, programs and source codes to which they were not entitled.³ Other surveys find that a majority of workers admit to wasting time at work, with some showing an average of over 2 hours a day of wasted time. It’s not so much standing around the water cooler and making personal phone calls as it used to be. The newer entries taking center stage include reading and writing blogs, keeping up on Facebook and Twitter and other social networking services.⁴

Let’s look at another dimension of stealing. In Malachi 3 God says,

“Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, ‘How have we robbed You?’ In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you! Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows.”
(8-10)

The basic point for us today is not to steal from God by not giving to Him and His work generously out of love and gratitude as He provides for and blesses us, and by not fulfilling

promises we have made to Him. Ecclesiastes 5:4-5 still applies.

“When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.”

Another dimension of stealing is not giving to and providing for others as we should. James 2:15-17 tells us

“If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,’ and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.”

The apostle John wrote,

“whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth” (1 John 3:17-18).

In all these and other dimensions, Ephesians 4:28 applies.

“He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need.”

“You shall not steal.”

The Ninth Commandment: “You shall not bear false witness.” The initial scope for this was the judicial system. For it to deliver true justice, witnesses had to tell the truth. A bit further on, at the opening of chapter 23, the people were told,

“You shall not bear a false report; do not join your hand with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. You shall not follow the masses in doing evil, nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after a multitude in order to pervert justice; nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his dispute” (1-3).

And a few verses later,

“You shall not pervert the justice due to your needy brother in his dispute. Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or the righteous, for I will not acquit the guilty” (6-7).

No false complaints. No false testimony. Moses spoke strongly about this in Deuteronomy 19,

“If a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing, then both the men who have the dispute shall stand

before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who will be in office in those days. The judges shall investigate thoroughly, and if the witness is a false witness and he has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you. The rest will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such an evil thing among you” (16-20).

There is more. Withholding evidence about a case makes one a false witness. Leviticus 5:1,

“Now if a person sins after he hears a public adjuration to testify when he is a witness, whether he has seen or otherwise known, if he does not tell it, then he will bear his guilt.”

This command extends out of the courtroom into every setting. There is a group of commands in Leviticus 19 which are tied together which points to the broader scope of not being a false witness.

“You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the LORD” (11-12).

So, God then told them “You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor; I am the LORD” (16). Ephesians 4:15 tells us truth is critical to individual and church spiritual growth. “... speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ.” In the same chapter the apostle Paul also wrote, “Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another” (Ephesians 4:25). “You shall not bear false witness.”

Now the last, the Tenth Commandment: “You shall not covet.” Verse 17,

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

Coveting, desiring, wanting — we know all about it. Now, this word can be used in a positive way. But here it is used in a negative way. It describes desiring something I do not have and don’t have a right to have because, as in the commandment, it belongs to someone else or because my desire is self-focused, thing-focused, even people-focused rather than God-focused.

Notice that God presents this quite differently from Commandments Six through Nine. They move from the outside to the inside,

- from the act of murder to attitudes and words that kill;
- from the act of adultery to the thoughts of adultery;
- from the act of stealing to the attitude of taking and withholding;

- from the act of being a false witness to keeping quiet and not coming to someone's defense.

But this last commandment goes from the inside to the outside, from the wrongful desire for something that is not mine and I don't have a right to possess, to the actions to get it for myself anyway.

John Calvin, commenting on this commandment in his *Institutes Of The Christian Religion*, tells us we should not allow any thought to force itself into our minds that could be harmful to others. Rather, all we imagine, consider and resolve to do should be for their good and advantage.⁵

Wanting more is an insatiable monster. When it comes to the current worldwide economic recession, we can debate the exact place on the podium, but wanting more, desiring, greed certainly took a medal for bringing this about. A *New York Times* columnist wrote a few months ago,

“What, if anything, have we learned from this decade's man-made economic disaster? It wasn't just trillions of dollars of wealth that went poof in the bubble. Certain American values also crumbled and vanished. Making quick killings by reckless gambling in the markets—rather than by investing long-term in new products, innovations, technologies or services that might grow and benefit America and the world—became the holy grail in the upper echelons of finance.”⁶

Now, the “poof of the bubble” may have actually revealed that the values he speaks of had already in large part crumbled and vanished. But the point remains: coveting, desiring, being greedy stood clearly, even proudly, front and center in this for all to see.

You may recall the process of sinful desires leading to sinful acts in James chapter 1.

“But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust [desires]. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death” (14-15).

“You shall not covet.” Now we turn to...

The Response To And Positive Value Of The Ten Commandments.

We begin with Israel. It's difficult, but try to picture yourself there at Mt. Sinai that day as one of the two million Israelites. You had prepared, consecrated yourself for this day. You heard the stern warnings not to cross the boundaries and go up the mountain. As God descended in an incredible display of His presence with thunder, lightning flashes, a thick cloud, fire and smoke, the whole area shaking violently and a trumpet sound growing louder and louder, you and everyone else were terrified.

Then God spoke. He spoke so that all of you heard these *Ten Words*, or Ten Commandments. When God finished speaking, you all shared a common thought. Verse 19, “[Moses, you] speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.”

Truly getting a glimpse of God’s glory, His majesty and holiness always leads to seeing our unworthiness, our inability to stand before God. You and all Israel could identify with the prophet Isaiah when hundreds of years later God gave him a vision of His glory. Isaiah wrote, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isaiah 6:5). And so, knowing God had chosen Moses as your leader and representative before Him, you all now said, “Yes Moses! You be our intermediary with God!”

Take note of Moses’ response in verse 20. “Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.” God’s purpose was not to scare them, but to impress on them that He is serious about His demands and blessings. It was to burn a memory of this deep into their minds and hearts so they would trust, reverence and obey Him always. We know the old saying, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” Some research suggests that a person’s memory of something increases dramatically when clear visuals are added to clear words. God gave Israel the perfect statement and visual demonstration of who He is and His truth for them.

How did they do? Just a bit later chapter 32 records that the people gave up on Moses as lost or dead because he was on the mountain to see God for so many days. They demanded a new form of leadership and object of worship. Aaron made the golden calf and they broke the second commandment, along with others, in their impatient, faithless rebellion.

The book of Numbers contains much more than a great deal of census material. It records Israel’s wandering in the wilderness for forty years. Chapter 11 records their complaining about God’s miracle food of manna, *again*. Chapters 13 and 14 summarize the fearful rather than faith-filled report of ten of the twelve-man reconnaissance team that checked out their promised land. The people were shocked. They complained. They said it would have been better to have died in Egypt, that God brought them out here just to die. Then they decided to stone Moses and Aaron, but God saved them. And, sadly, the book continues with more of this.

Israel’s response is a matter history and is public for all to read. What about my response, your response? How are we responding to the truth-filled Ten Commandments? Has God’s great grace and mercy, His holiness and love which He has displayed and showered on us made an indelible impression on our minds and hearts which is leading us to loving, faithful, reverent obedience? How frequently, how easily do we forget who God really is, what He has done and what He really expects of us, and carelessly wander, go our own way?

Each of the Ten Commandments is a bedrock truth for living rightly with God and each other that comes from His holiness and His great love for us. Hosea is one of the *minor prophets* that close out the Old Testament. It is a book about God’s unchanging love for His

people even when they repeatedly, continually were unfaithful to Him. In chapter 9 verse 10 God says, “I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your forefathers as the earliest fruit on the fig tree in its first season.” God loved them! They brought joy to His heart! Can you imagine what joy it would be like to find grapes in the hot, barren desert? What delight it is to see the first fruit on a tree? God gave Israel His commandments in love for their good.

God loves us! We bring joy to His heart! All of His commands are given in love for our good.

But that 10th verse of Hosea 9 is not complete. It continues, it ends with, “But they came to Baal-peor and devoted themselves to shame, and they became as detestable as that which they loved.” Baal-peor takes us back to the book of Numbers and their wilderness wanderings. It was one more time when some of the people of Israel disregarded God’s loving, holy demands and rebelled. God judged them severely; 24,000 died.

Yes, we live in a much different time, but God still is serious about His commands. He still disciplines His children. How much more it pleases and glorifies God, how much better it is for us when we live with faithful, loving obedience.

Conclusion.

Reflect on these *Positive Negatives* now with God—

- “You shall not murder”—“You shall respect life, respect everyone, because they are created in the image of God.”
- “You shall not commit adultery”—“You shall be faithful to your spouse.”
- “You shall not steal”—“You shall respect what belongs to others, fulfill your promises to God and share with others.”
- “You shall not bear false witness”—“You shall be truthful at all times and in all places.”
- “You shall not covet”—“You shall be content.”

Thank God for lovingly giving you His truth, His commands to direct how you relate to Him and others. Commit yourself to remember, to trust, to obey, as you ask God to keep on working on your heart, to keep on changing you to be more and more like Jesus Christ your Savior.

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