

CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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**Grades 7-8
Year 2
Quarter 2**

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Lesson Aim

To expose students to the general content, structure, and purpose of the most familiar summary of God's will for human behavior.

Memory Verse

Matthew 5:13 - "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men."

Lesson Background

Middle school students are at the age where they are testing limits and establishing personal standards. All around them, they see people who are telling them that such standards have no ultimate reference point - that a person should do whatever seems right in his own eyes. It is therefore vital that your students understand that God has given to His creatures a standard of behavior that doesn't change with the times. In examining that standard during this quarter, we hope to provide for the students in your class a foundation for personal ethical decisions that is rooted in the Word of God.

Though we will be spending most of our time during this quarter on the Ten Commandments, your students should understand how those well-known statements fit into the Bible as a whole. They do not represent God's requirements for a single time or a single group of people, but are instead a summary of God's will for all people at all times and all places. The Ten Commandments have this permanent and unchanging character because they are an expression of the character of God Himself. Because He does not change, neither does His standard for His human creatures. Today's lesson will attempt to present this sort

of necessary background information. Your students will be exposed, not only to the nature of the Ten Commandments as a summary of God's character, and thus of His revealed will, but also see how they fit into the Old Testament law as a whole and how they themselves may be divided (the traditional "two tables"). Thus the underlying application today is relevance. Your students should come away from today's lesson with the conviction that the Ten Commandments are intended to guide their lives today, not just the lives of the Jews fifteen hundred years before Christ.

Lesson Procedure

Start the lesson by asking the members of your class to name the Ten Commandments. Hopefully they will be able to get most or all of them through cooperative effort, though they may not be able to get them in the correct order (Could you?). Once they have done this, ask them to give examples of ways in which they have seen these commandments violated on television in the past week. It shouldn't take too long to compile a rather substantial list of violations. Then ask the students the following series of questions: Why did God give the Ten Commandments? For whom did He intend them? Are they intended to apply to people today? What people? The answers your students give should provide a good indicator for you of how prepared they are to understand the material of today's lesson.

1. The Law of God

When God gave His law to the Israelites in the wilderness, what He told them was not just some arbitrary standard. God did not just sit back and say, "What shall I make my people do in order to please me? What can I require that will be sure to take away all their fun?" God's law is not arbitrary, and it certainly is not calculated to make life miserable for His creatures. Instead, it is an expression of God's character. In other words, if we look at the law of God, it tells us what God Himself is like. Keeping the law essentially involves acting as God would act. This is why Jesus Christ is the perfect example for Christians. As He lived out the character of God perfectly in this world, He also kept the law that was an expression of that character.

As far as the law being intended to make people miserable is concerned, nothing could be farther from the truth. Because of our sinful natures, none of us likes restrictions. But restrictions are good for us. The old analogy of the train continues to be useful here. Only when a train observes the restrictions of following the track is it truly free to be what it was created to be. A train careening wildly across an open field does no good to anyone. In the same way, a creature of God who does not follow the "tracks" God has established will not experience freedom, but complete frustration and ultimate destruction.

2. The Place of the Ten Commandments in the Law of God

The law given by God in the Old Testament went much further than the Ten Commandments, of course. Much of the material in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy gives details about how God intended His people to live. Commentators typically divide the Old Testament law into three parts - the moral law, the civil law, and the ceremonial law.

The moral law is an expression of God's general standards for human behavior. The Ten Commandments serve as a summary of this. Because it is an expression of God's character, the moral law is not something that changes from time to time or place to place. The Ten Commandments were intended by God to apply, not only to Israel, but also to us. In fact, they were intended as the standard by which all human behavior was to be judged. Romans 2:14-16 tells us that even those who did not have the law had

consciences to tell them what was right and wrong. Thus the Ten Commandments are intended for all people, not just Christians. They express God's will for human behavior, and all men are accountable for measuring up to the standard contained there.

The civil law involved the standards for the government of the nation of Israel. Israel was a theocracy - a nation that directly acknowledged God as its head. Since Christian theocracies no longer exist today (nor can they, though that is a discussion appropriate to a more advanced group), we should not expect the civil law of Israel to carry over directly into the national constitutions of modern nations. However, we can still learn much from the principles upon which the laws of the nation of Israel were based (about things like the nature of criminal justice, economic responsibility for the poor, etc.).

The ceremonial law involved requirements for Israel's worship - the priesthood, the sacrificial system, etc. The book of Hebrews tells us clearly that Christ fulfilled all of these laws, which were intended to paint a picture that would instruct the Israelites about the nature of the salvation that was going to be accomplished by their coming Messiah. Thus sacrifices are no longer needed, and Christ is the only Priest that His people require. The ceremonial laws have therefore passed from the scene.

3. The Ten Commandments as a Summary of God's Law

The Ten Commandments are only one of the summaries of God's law to be found in Scripture. Others include the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12) and the two great commandments (Matthew 22:37-40). These are all different ways of summarizing the same thing - God's character. Each in its own way covers all questions of human behavior. Jesus makes this clear when He expounds on the true meaning of the Ten Commandments in Matthew 5 (we will study this in some detail two weeks from now). There is no moral question upon which the Ten Commandments give us no guidance. Thus our study of this particular summary this quarter should open the way to discussion of all kinds of moral questions that affect teenagers, and we should come to those questions expecting answers from God's Word.

4. The Divisions of the Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments themselves are generally divided into two groups or "tables." These two tables deal with man's relationship to God and man's relationship to other people. The first four commandments clearly deal with man's relationship to God, while the last five just as clearly relate to man's responsibilities to other people. The Fifth Commandment is a sort of transition, largely because it deals with the concept of authority. Human authorities rule only as extensions of the authority of God, and are due respect on that basis.

Ask your students why they think the commandments dealing with man's relationship to God come first in the list. They should be able to figure out that, unless a person loves God, he cannot really love his neighbor. Only those who honor God are interested in doing to others what they would have others do to them (notice how I have woven in the language of the other two summaries here). Thus a proper relationship to God motivates a person to have a proper relationship to others. Even more strongly, a person cannot have a right relationship to others unless he first has a right relationship to God.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by encouraging your students about the relevance of the Ten Commandments for their own lives. In the coming weeks, we will be looking at questions that are vital to their success and happiness.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT TEN COMMANDMENTS

1. How do the Ten Commandments relate to the character of God?
2. Whom did God intend to keep the Ten Commandments? Were they just for Israel?
3. In what sense can the Ten Commandments be viewed as a summary of the entire law?
4. What were the three parts into which the Old Testament law is usually divided? How do these three parts apply to our lives today?
5. What are some other summaries of the law found in the Bible besides the Ten Commandments?
6. Into what two parts, or “tables,” may the Ten Commandments be divided? What is the basic emphasis of each part?
7. Why does the second table of the law depend upon the first?

JESUS' SUMMARY OF THE LAW

Lesson Aim

To help students see that their responsibility as creatures of God is to love God and each other, and understand how this relates to the Ten Commandments.

Memory Verse

Matthew 5:14-15 - "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house."

Lesson Background

In the week prior to the crucifixion Jesus' enemies were closing in on Him. In an attempt to gather evidence that could be used in His trial, the religious leaders gathered around Him in the Temple, trying to make Him say something incriminating. The Herodians tried first, with their question about paying taxes, but Jesus turned them aside. The Sadducees were no more successful when they attempted to reduce the doctrine of the resurrection of the body to absurdity with their example of the woman who was married successively to seven brothers. Finally the heavy hitters arrived - the Pharisees. What would they ask? One of their representatives came up to Jesus and asked their carefully-planned loaded question: "Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?" While the question may have seemed innocent enough, it was calculated to fragment Jesus' support among the people. The rabbis had long ago in their study of the Law concluded that God had given His people a total of 613 commandments (and you thought there were only ten, didn't you?). Not satisfied with discovering this startling truth, they had then proceeded to argue interminably over which of these 613 was the most important. Scholar differed with scholar, and each had

his own following among the people. Surely, no matter what answer Jesus gave, He would alienate some of His followers. Here was their big chance to get Him to stick His foot in His mouth.

Jesus, of course, outsmarted them, as usual. His answer, found in Matthew 22:37-40, was that the greatest commandment was the one to love God, while the second was the command to love your neighbor. His answer was flawless, and avoided the trap the Pharisees had so carefully set because these commandments, like the Decalogue, are a summary of God's entire will for mankind. They take up within themselves the whole law.

Your students are not likely to be caught up in a debate over which commandment of God is the most important. A temptation they may face, however, is to give to a summary such as this one or the Golden Rule a content that it was never intended to have. Since the word "love" is used in such a variety of ways today, people easily justify their own behavior by saying they are acting out of love while at the same time blatantly violating one of God's more specific commands. How many commit adultery, or even murder (in the case of abortion) and excuse it by saying that they were doing the loving thing? How many of your students face the temptation to lie for another student, or help someone else cheat, and rationalize their behavior because they are simply doing for someone else what they would want that person to do for them? The important point that must be communicated in today's lesson is that, while the command to love summarizes God's law, God's law defines and gives content and direction to the command to love. What does it mean to love God? It means to put Him first, to worship no idols, to respect His name, and to worship Him on the designated day and in the designated way. What does it mean to love your neighbor? It means to honor those in authority, to refrain from murder, adultery, stealing, and lying, and to be content with what you have and not covet what belongs to your neighbor.

The summary Jesus gave in Matthew 22 tells us something else also. It tells us that it is not enough to avoid doing what is wrong. Love requires positive activity on behalf of others. Being a godly person means reaching out and doing good, not just avoiding harm.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by reminding the students that last week you began a study of the Ten Commandments, and review a few of the points you made about them. Then ask the students which of the commandments they think is the most important, and why. Most students will probably tell you either that the first is the most important, or that they are all equally significant. If they do the latter, tell them that their understanding is superior to that of the Bible scholars of Jesus' day. Then move into a description of the situation in Matthew 22, using the material in the Lesson Background. Tell your students that, like the Ten Commandments, this passage gives a summary of the law of God. Today we will be discussing that summary.

1. Loving God

What does it mean to love God? Jesus clearly is not talking about the same thing here as loving your girlfriend or loving pizza, though Christian mystics throughout the ages have become emotionally enthralled by the beauty of Christ, and the catechism says that the chief end of man is "to . . . enjoy [God] forever." I suspect that Jesus has something a little different in mind here, however. The kind of love that Jesus is talking about is a commitment to the welfare of another person that results in action on that person's behalf. In other words, to love God is to commit yourself to Him completely and do what brings honor to His name.

The total commitment required by this command appears readily in that Jesus says that one's love for God should be with the whole heart and soul and mind - in other words, everything we are and have is committed to God. This is the same point Paul makes in Romans 12:1-2. The Bible never encourages people to "make Jesus the Lord of their lives." The fact of the matter is that He is already the Lord, not only of His people, but of everyone, whether they acknowledge Him or not. The difference between Christians and non-Christians is that those who are God's children gladly own Christ as their Master. Make sure your students understand the folly of those who teach that Christ can be Savior without being at the same time Lord. One who claims to trust Christ for salvation but refuses to submit his life to Him as Lord is not fulfilling the first and greatest commandment.

2. Loving Your Neighbor

Given the definition of love used in the preceding section, your students should have little trouble figuring out what Jesus meant when He said that the second great commandment was to love your neighbor. Again, it is not emotional attachment that is being required. In fact, Jesus is not even asking that you like everyone. What He is demanding is that your actions toward others be the outworking of a commitment to seek the welfare of those around you. In other words, you do what is best for other people rather than what is best for yourself.

What about the part of the command that says to love your neighbor "as yourself"? In recent years, many people have gotten off the track on this subject and started teaching the need to cultivate self-love. They argue that it is impossible to love others unless we first learn to love ourselves. Otherwise, we will bring all the hang-ups we have about our own self-images into our relationships with other people. The Bible tells us, though, that we all naturally love ourselves (Ephesians 5:29). It isn't something we have to work at. In fact, requiring the cultivation of self-love prior to showing love to others completely contradicts the thrust of what Jesus is saying here. Only as we forget ourselves in order to pay attention to others can we truly love. Self-esteem comes, not from focusing on ourselves, but from seeing what God does through us as we reach out to others.

One final point needs to be made about the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves, and that is the point Jesus made with the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. Notice that the parable was told in the context of a discussion about the same two commandments that are the focus of today's lesson. The lawyer with whom Jesus was speaking had already stated that the two commandments in question contained the essence of God's law. But then he tried to weasel his way out of the corner into which he had painted himself by giving a narrow definition to the word "neighbor." After all, the second great commandment is a lot easier to keep if it only refers to those people who are like me, my friends and relatives, those with whom I have something in common. Jesus, of course, refused to let him get away with it. By telling the parable, He emphasized that one's neighbor is anyone who is in need - even if that person happens to be one's worst enemy. This again underscores the fact that the love of which this commandment speaks is not a natural love. It is supernatural, a love that comes only from God, a love that is implanted by His Spirit when a person becomes part of God's family.

3. God Does Not Contradict Himself

Point out to the students that you have now discussed two different summaries of God's law. Ask them if they ever contradict one another. Their obvious response should be a negative one. Then probe a little further, asking them if loving someone else could ever require disobeying parents or stealing or lying. Point out that many today clearly believe that adultery is acceptable as long as it is an act of love. Could love for another person ever require the violation of one of the Ten Commandments?

Make sure your students understand that such a thing could never be. God never contradicts Himself, and neither do the various summaries of the law found in Scripture. God's law reveals His character, and His character never changes. The Ten Commandments define what it means to love God and love your neighbor in the same way that the 613 laws found in the Old Testament define in more specific terms what it means to keep the Ten Commandments. One part of God's law can never be used as an excuse for breaking another part. Specifically, your students must understand that they can never rationalize lying, cheating, or immorality by saying that they were only trying to show love to some other person.

Conclusion

Conclude today's session by reviewing with your students the definition of love given in the lesson. Remind them of the total commitment God demands and encourage them to show the kind of love to one another, their families, their neighbors, and their classmates that God's law requires. Also make sure your non-Christian students understand that they should not think to earn God's favor by loving their neighbor. The kind of love that God demands is impossible apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. Only those who first love God are able rightly to show love to their neighbors.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

JESUS' SUMMARY OF THE LAW

1. What are some of the different ways in which the word “love” is used today? Give several examples.
2. When Jesus said that the greatest commandments were to love God and love your neighbor, what did He mean by “love”? How did His definition differ from those listed in the previous question?
3. Why is it impossible for a person to have Christ as his Savior without also acknowledging Him as Lord? Use Matthew 22:37-40 in your answer.
4. Why did Jesus say that a person should love his neighbor as he loves himself? Does that mean that we have to learn to love ourselves before we can learn to love others?
5. Is it ever right to show love to your neighbor by lying for him? Explain your answer.
6. When Jesus says that a person should love his neighbor, who does He mean by the word “neighbor”?

THE FULLNESS OF THE LAW

Lesson Aim

To help students understand that the law of God applies to the attitudes of the heart as well as outward behavior.

Memory Verse

Matthew 5:16 - "In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

Lesson Background

The Pharisees of Jesus' day were so convinced that they kept the law perfectly that they referred to those who did not adhere to their traditions as "sinners." What made them so sure of their own righteousness was that they defined holiness purely in terms of outward behavior. In addition to this, they understood God's laws in such a narrowly literal way that they found them relatively easy to keep. Such convenient approaches to righteousness are not limited to the Pharisees of the first century, of course. How many young people from Christian families in twenty-first-century America grow up thinking that what it takes to please God is to avoid drinking and smoking (you may substitute whatever taboos are appropriate for your area)? The people of the twenty-first century, like those of the first, find it easy to define righteousness in terms of outward behavior.

Jesus emphasized, however, that God's law goes far beyond mere outward behavior. True obedience is a matter of the heart. Doing the right things must be a product of having a clean heart. Those who appear outwardly righteous but who harbor sin inside are compared by Jesus to whitewashed tombs. Thus as we

embark on a study of God's law as it applies to middle school students, we must be sure that they understand that God is demanding more than mere outward conformity.

The best passage with which to communicate that truth is Jesus' discussion of the true meaning of the law in Matthew 5:21-48. In this passage, He explains the full meaning of the Old Testament law by contrasting it with the narrow and overly literal interpretations given to that law by the religious leaders of His day. Time after time, He focuses in on the importance of attitudes as the foundation for holy living. Your students need to understand that God cares about what is going on inside them as well as the way they act before others. Today's lesson should help to encourage them in that direction. Of course, you should also be able to communicate to any non-Christians in your class that attempts to fool God or earn His favor by "being good" are useless. The only way to please God is to come to Him and ask for a new heart.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by describing how the Greeks performed plays. Their dramas and comedies were performed in large outdoor amphitheaters. The acting area was in a valley, and the audience would sit on benches carved into the surrounding hills. This provided for great acoustics, but terrible sight lines. The people in the audience could hear the actors very clearly, but only the broadest gestures could be seen because of the distance between actor and audience, and facial movements were out of the question. In fact, the audience was so far away it would have been difficult to tell one character from another. To overcome this problem, the Greek actors carried oversized masks in front of their faces. These both served as megaphones to amplify the actors' voices and allowed the audience to identify the various characters easily (this was particularly important in Greek plays because often the same actor would play many different characters). These actors who wore masks to communicate an identity other than their own were called *hypocrites* - the Greek word from which we get our English word "hypocrite." A hypocrite is thus one who tries to convince others that he is something other than what he really is. Jesus severely criticized those whose upright outward behavior concealed wicked hearts. He criticized them, not because they were doing good, but because they thought that outward behavior was enough to satisfy God. In the passage we will be looking at today, Jesus teaches that obeying God involves the attitudes of the heart as well as outwardly observable behavior.

Have the students turn to Matthew 5:21-48. Since the background of rabbinical teaching is needed to understand what approach to the law Jesus is criticizing, your students will not be able to get this information on their own. They should, however, be able to apply Jesus' teaching to their own situations.

1. Murder and Hatred (Matthew 5:21-26)

The rabbis here misinterpreted the Sixth Commandment by limiting it to the overt act of murder itself. While murder clearly is wrong, Jesus makes the point that the things that lead to murder - anger, hatred, harsh words, insults - are also violations of God's law (*Raca* is the first-century equivalent of "airhead"). The basic principle here is that thinking it and saying it are just as bad as doing it as far as God is concerned. They are equally sinful, though of course they don't have the same consequences on the human level.

Verses 23-24 make the point that a person cannot have a right relationship with God without maintaining good relationships with other people. One who is holding a grudge or harboring hatred in his heart cannot worship God in any way that would be pleasing to Him.

Spend some time with your students here, particularly emphasizing the matter of insulting language. Middle school students are notorious for their cruelty to one another, particularly in the area of language. Make sure your students understand that, as far as God is concerned, those insults are “little murders.”

2. Adultery and Lust (Matthew 5:27-30)

The rabbis did the same thing with the Seventh Commandment that they had done with the sixth. Jesus makes the point that the lustful thoughts that lead to sexual immorality are just as bad as the overt act itself. The key section for your students here is the last two verses of the paragraph. When Jesus talks about gouging out eyes and cutting off hands, He is not speaking of self-mutilation. Instead, He is making the point that we may need to remove from our lives certain things that are good in themselves if those things become sources of temptation that lead us into sin. Your students are surrounded by literature, music, television, and movies that have the potential to generate lust. If these things cause them to violate God’s law by thinking impure thoughts and harboring sinful attitudes, they must be removed, even if they are not wrong in and of themselves.

3. Divorce (Matthew 5:31-32)

Jesus elaborates more on this in Matthew 19, but essentially what the religious teachers of the day were doing was making an absolute standard out of what God intended to be a temporary curb on sinful abuse. God intended marriage to be permanent, but the rabbis were allowing people to destroy marriages for almost any reason. Though this may not be a matter of concern to your students now, it is vital that they approach marriage in the years ahead with the mindset that it will be permanent. Anyone who enters marriage with the attitude that “if it doesn’t work out, we can always get a divorce” is already on the road to a broken marriage.

4. Telling the Truth (Matthew 5:33-37)

The Old Testament spoke very seriously about the whole matter of taking oaths. Anytime someone swore to the truth of something or swore to do something, he was to do it, even if it turned out to be a foolish promise (see Jephthah’s foolish vow in Judges 11:29-40). The rabbis had softened this requirement of absolute truthfulness by developing a hierarchy of oaths. They reasoned that the Third Commandment prohibited the empty use of the name of the Lord, but did not prohibit the use of other words in the same way. Anyone who swore by something associated with God, however, was getting too close to the commandment for comfort. Thus the hierarchy developed. If you swore by the name of God, you had to do what you said. If you swore by something associated with God, like heaven or the Temple, it was serious, but not absolutely binding. Other oaths, however (a modern equivalent might be “cross my heart and hope to die”), were not really to be taken seriously.

Clearly, under such a system, anyone who heard someone else swear that something was true, or swear to do something, would immediately become suspicious that the person doing the swearing was trying to weasel out of something. Thus Jesus tells His disciples that the best solution is not to swear at all. That way no one can misunderstand your motives (note that using this passage to argue against taking an oath in court is to miss completely its historical context). Instead, a follower of Christ is to be known as a person who tells the truth at all times. A Christian’s reputation should be such that when he says that something is true or that he will do something, everyone immediately accepts it as fact. Make sure your students understand that this completely rules out “white lies” or any other kind of deception for convenience, or even lies “for the good of the other person.”

5. Revenge and Love (Matthew 5:38-48)

The Old Testament teaching of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” is widely misunderstood even today. It was given to the Israelites as a principle of official justice. It communicates the idea that the punishment should fit the crime. Judges were not to exact penalties that were disproportionately heavy or too lenient. The rabbis, however, argued that what applied to formal justice also applied to personal relationships. Thus they sanctioned taking the law into your own hands by doing to others what they had done to you.

Jesus, however, teaches that, while the responsibility of the judge is justice, the responsibility of the individual as he relates to others is love. This applies even to enemies, or to those who are trying to take advantage of a person. While Jesus does not intend His followers to be doormats, He does indicate that He and His Father are the perfect examples of what He has in mind. God sends blessings even upon the sinners who are actively rebelling against Him. Jesus came into this world and died to save those who hated Him. We can hardly go beyond such examples of love in our treatment of those with whom we come in contact.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by talking for a few minutes about Matthew 5:48. God’s standard is no less than perfection. Though this perfection cannot be reached in this life, it gives us a worthy goal to stimulate the followers of Jesus to continuing growth and humble dependence on Him. Such a standard also eliminates pride by showing us how far we have to go. For the non-Christians in your class, make sure they understand that any effort on their part to please God is hopeless. Only those who are perfect can please Him, and only those who are clothed with the righteousness of Christ are seen by God as perfect.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

THE FULLNESS OF THE LAW

1. How was the word “hypocrite” used by the Greeks of Jesus’ day? How is it used in the Bible?
2. How did the Jewish rabbis misinterpret the command against murder? What did Jesus say it really meant? Why does he say that insulting language is as bad as murder?
3. What did Jesus mean when he told His followers to gouge out their eyes and cut off their hands? What are some “eyes” and “hands” in your life that are leading you into sin?
4. How did the religious leaders develop a hierarchy of oaths from the command not to take the Lord’s name in vain?
5. Why did Jesus tell His disciples not to swear at all?
6. What did the Old Testament law mean by the phrase, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”? How did the rabbis corrupt this meaning?
7. In what ways does God provide a perfect example of what it means to love your enemies?
8. If Jesus demands perfection of His followers, how can anyone possibly hope to follow Him?

THOSE DIFFICULT GRAY AREAS

Lesson Aim

To acquaint students with the biblical principles for dealing with debatable moral issues, and encourage them to apply these principles, rather than their own emotions and desires, to some of the open moral questions with which they are struggling.

Memory Verse

Matthew 5:17 - “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

Lesson Background

Part of the process of maturing and internalizing one’s own moral code is the often-annoying adolescent practice of testing and stretching the limits of authority. This stretching frequently occurs in the area of mildly unacceptable behavior at home and in the classroom, or sometimes worse. With many Christian teenagers, the questions that become burning issues are not so much things like sex and drugs that are directly contrary to biblical teaching, but matters like dancing, movies, and drinking, which (with the possible exception of the last) are not subject to clear biblical conclusions, yet have been traditionally frowned upon by many in the Christian community. By challenging the authority of adults in matters such as these where no clear teachings of Scripture can be cited, adolescents flex and exercise their “freedom muscles” without violating explicit prohibitions of God’s Word.

In reality, of course, “gray areas” don’t exist. Every thought, word, or action is either right or wrong - right if it glorifies God and wrong if it doesn’t. That is not to say that many of our choices are not between

equally good things, and thus in a sense “indifferent.” Furthermore, certain personal and situational considerations make certain actions right for some people in some situations and wrong for others. Even in these morally complex issues where something cannot be said to be always right or always wrong, however, the Bible gives us guidance. The most extensive discussions of questions of this type are found in Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8, where Paul focuses on the eating of meat sacrificed to idols, along with other types of behavior considered debatable in the early church.

In a mixed Jewish-Gentile congregation like those found in Rome and Corinth, the question of meat offered to idols was a divisive one. Most craft guilds and civic organizations had their patron deities, and banquets associated with different trades, as well as public celebrations, would often involve eating food that had first been ceremonially offered to the god associated with the guild or municipality. Furthermore, during the regular business activities of the pagan temples, they would receive far more food from the worshipers than could possibly be consumed by the temple priests. They would therefore sell this food in the marketplace (after it had been ceremonially offered to the deity, of course), often at a cut-rate price, to avoid waste and make a profit for the temple at the same time. These practices posed a problem for many Christians. Some argued that eating meat offered to idols involved participating in, or at least sanctioning, the worship of those idols, or supporting the pagan temples financially. Others argued that purchasing good-quality meat at a reduced price was good stewardship, and that such meat could not be tainted by having been offered to an idol that represented a non-existent god. In addition, the guild banquets and civic festivals provided a good opportunity for Christians to show that they weren’t the sorts of “oddballs” that so many rumors pictured them to be, and also gave chances for witness to unbelievers. Some Christians argued on a more personal level, maintaining that their recent conversion from idolatry did not allow them in good conscience to eat meat that reminded them of their sordid past, while others simply affirmed that they liked the meat, there was nothing wrong with it, and they would continue to eat it no matter what others thought.

If these arguments sound familiar, don’t be surprised. The name of almost any questionable moral issue that has divided the church over the last two thousand years could be plugged into the preceding paragraph with little modification. As a result, Paul’s treatment of an issue that has no relevance for us today (after all, how many local dens of idol worship sell meat to the general public?) provides principles that continue to be applicable to the modern church, and to your students. In applying those principles, it will be vitally important to clarify for your students the class of issues to which those principles apply. It has historically been far too easy for people to justify anything they wanted to do by claiming that it was a debatable issue or fell into a gray area. Your students need to know that some things are black and white. No justification can be given for behavior that is explicitly condemned in Scripture. On the other hand, they need to know how to deal with questionable matters, specifically by considering the effect of their behavior on others - an issue that goes far beyond the rightness or wrongness of the behavior in and of itself. Ultimately, the “right” thing to do when it comes to debatable issues is what is best for others.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the class by asking the students what issues they most frequently have differences of opinion with their parents and teachers about. They will probably mention things like rules, clothes, and music, and may include some of the issues listed in the Lesson Background. Then ask them whether these disputed topics are questions of right and wrong or matters of personal preference. Personal preferences carry weight, but cannot be debated using the ammunition of moral persuasion. Be on the lookout for answers like, “My father (or mother, or teacher, or pastor) says _____ is wrong, but I don’t see what’s wrong with it.” It is issues such as these, where rightness and wrongness are being debated, that should be the focus of your lesson. List the ones your students mention on the board. Make sure, too, that the issues you choose to focus on are ones not directly addressed in Scripture. Assure your students that, despite the fact that these

questions are not specifically treated in the Bible, we are not left to argue interminably with no hope of a solution. God has given us guidelines for dealing with even such knotty issues as these. Then have them turn to Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8 and read the chapters together.

1. The Issue at Stake

Use the material from the Lesson Background to explain to your class what was involved in the dispute over meat offered to idols and what arguments were used on each side. Then ask them which side was right - those who opposed the use of the meat or those who favored it. The question can and should be answered in two ways. First of all, the passages in question make it clear that those who favored use of the meat were right (I Corinthians 8:4,6,8; Romans 14:14) - there was nothing wrong with eating the stuff. On the other hand, Paul also indicates that both sides were wrong, not so much in their treatment of the issue as in their treatment of one another.

Before moving on to look at the interpersonal aspects of the problem, emphasize to your students that the principles found in these chapters only apply to matters that are right in and of themselves. Nothing explicitly condemned in Scripture can be justified using Paul's guidelines. It would be inappropriate, for instance, to argue that we should be charitable and recognize that some people differ in their views of premarital sex or homosexuality, and that all should accept one another. If the Bible says it is wrong, differences of opinion are not acceptable among Christians.

2. The Weak and the Strong

In the chapters before us today, Paul describes two groups of Christians. He refers to them as the strong brothers and the weak brothers. Ask your students to describe the members of the two groups. They should be able to figure out that the strong brothers are the ones who eat the meat, while the weak brothers are the ones whose consciences will not allow them to do so.

Then ask your students what attitudes these groups showed toward one another. The passages indicate that the strong either mocked the weak for their hypersensitive consciences or flaunted their liberty in an offensive way before those who considered their behavior to be wrong. The weak, on the other hand, condemned the strong as sinners who were offending God as well as themselves.

At this point in the lesson, return for a few minutes to the list you put on the board at the beginning of today's session. Ask your students to define what positions on each of those issues would correspond to what Paul calls the weak brothers and the strong brothers. The members of the class will probably be surprised to find themselves classed as strong brothers while the authorities with whom they differ are classed as weak brothers on many of the issues. [NOTE: Knowing this is coming, be sure to choose wisely the issues you write on the board at the beginning of the class period. Make sure they fit the category of debatable issues covered by Paul in Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8.] Many people fail to realize that Paul sees the freedom to enjoy God's gifts as a mark of strength, while strict narrowness and an overly restrictive conscience are seen as the characteristics of the weak brother.

3. The Solution to the Problem

Paul indicates that both the strong and the weak brother have responsibilities for solving the conflict between them. The weak brother is to realize that others may in good conscience do what he himself may be uncomfortable about, as long as that behavior is not condemned by God's Word. He has a responsibility to refrain from criticizing his brothers who do these things. He also must realize that if his conscience

bothers him about something, he shouldn't do it - even if others try to convince him that it is acceptable behavior.

The greater responsibility lies with the strong brother. He must show love for the weaker brother by not pressuring him to violate his conscience. He must also be willing to refrain from behavior that would cause others to sin (this is what the word "stumblingblock" refers to), even if it may not be sin for him. [Again, a parenthetical note may be helpful. The King James Version's use of the word "offend" has generated much misunderstanding of these passages. Paul is not saying that a person should avoid doing anything that another person may not like. The "offense" is something that causes another person to sin, not something that makes him turn up his nose in distaste. If that were the case, the result would be a tyranny of the weak, in which anything that bothered anyone else would be forbidden. Unfortunately, this was often the case in the evangelical Christian church in America.]

The conclusion, then, takes us back to the same territory we were in last week - the realm of motivation. When something is not evil in itself, yet is a matter of dispute, motivations are all-important. Paul concludes by saying that Christians should be motivated by two things, no matter what positions they take on some of these questionable issues. In the first place, they must do whatever they do to the glory of God. "I do it because I enjoy it" is not good enough. Whether a person chooses to participate in the questionable behavior or not, his decision should be motivated by a desire to please God. Secondly, Christians should make their decisions about these questions by considering what choices would most clearly show love to others. Selfish choices are always wrong choices. If we cared more about the welfare of others than about our own, many of these disputes would fade into insignificance. A third consideration that bears mentioning is the matter of authority, of course. Make sure your students understand that, no matter what their motivations may be, they are responsible before God to obey those whom God has put over them.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by returning again to the list on the blackboard. Encourage the students to examine their own motives to make sure that their stands on these issues are not based on personal preference, peer pressure, or emotional desires, but are rooted in a genuine concern to honor God and show love to others.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

THOSE DIFFICULT GRAY AREAS

1. In I Corinthians 8 and Romans 14, what were the Christians arguing about? Why was this such a divisive issue in the early church?
2. What are some matters of dispute today that fit into the same category?
3. Who were the people Paul called the strong brothers and the weak brothers? Where did they stand on the issue in question?
4. What attitudes did the strong and weak brothers have toward one another? What attitudes did Paul say they ought to take toward one another?
5. What are the two most important considerations that should determine how we act on some of the questionable choices we face today?
6. How can the words of Paul in these chapters help you to get along better with your parents and teachers on some of the matters about which you differ?

PUTTING GOD FIRST

Lesson Aim

To help students understand and apply to their own lives the prohibitions against idolatry found in the First and Second Commandments.

Memory Verse

Matthew 5:18 - "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

Lesson Background

We begin this week our survey of the Ten Commandments. We have already set the stage for the broad application of these commands by looking at Matthew 5, where Jesus repeatedly indicated that God's laws should not be restricted to outward behavior, but must also be understood to include motives and attitudes. Thus as we go through the commandments one by one, we should be able to challenge the students concerning their attitudes as well as their actual observable behavior. This is particularly important with your students because middle schoolers are just getting to the stage in life where they become conscious of their own motives. As that consciousness develops, they need to learn to evaluate their inner lives from God's perspective.

We are going to be considering the first two commandments of the Decalogue together, not because they say the same thing, but because they deal with the same general subject. Both speak concerning worship; the first answers the question "Whom?" while the second answers the question "How?" Another way of putting it is to say that the First Commandment condemns the worship of false gods, while the Second condemns false worship of the true God.

When the First Commandment says, “You shall have no other gods before me,” it literally forbids the introduction of pagan idols into the Tabernacle or Temple (the word translated “before me” means “before my face,” an idiomatic expression for “in my presence”). We know, of course, that God’s presence is not restricted to the Holy of Holies. God’s omnipresence means that there is no room anywhere in the universe for any god but Him. Your students must understand that this command is a challenge to their priorities. What it boils down to is that God is to be first in all things. New Testament rephrasings of this same idea appear in passages like Matthew 6:24 and I Corinthians 10:31. If God is truly first, everything is done to His glory, and no competition is allowed to crowd Him out of any area of our lives.

The clearest illustration of the violation of the Second Commandment’s prohibition against idols is found in the incident of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32. When Aaron crafted the Golden Calf for the people to worship, they did not believe they were worshipping some pagan deity. Instead, the Golden Calf became for them a means of visualizing the true God. God did not approve, of course, because any human effort to picture God inevitably falls short of the truth and involves distortion by acts of commission or omission. For your students, the commandment should demonstrate the fallacy of any sentence beginning with the words, “I can’t believe in a God who would . . .,” or, “I like to think of God as . . .” Humanly-constructed mental pictures of God are just as false as stone or wooden idols intended to represent the true God. We are not free to construct a God of our own liking; we must accept God as He is, and as He has revealed Himself to us in Scripture.

A second application of the Second Commandment involves worship itself. While it is not my intention to get involved with the various ramifications of the Regulative Principle here, your students should know that the same God who tells us who He is also tells us how He is to be worshiped. That means that we are not free to worship God in any way that we choose. God has designated a certain day for worship, has told us what we are to do on that day (we will look at these more thoroughly when we examine the Fourth Commandment, of course), and has told us how and why He wants His people to gather together. Church is not an option, and neither is preaching. On the other hand, while God indicates that He is to be worshiped with music, He does not specify one particular style. Your students should thus understand that while the worship of God must fit into a certain structure that He Himself has provided, there is within that structure a certain amount of freedom that allows for joyful expression of praise. Church worship is not to be a free-for-all, but it also does not need to be boring.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by reminding your students about the subject discussed in last week’s lesson, pointing out particularly that a first-century practice that no longer is a problem in our society was nonetheless able to provide the basis for a helpful discussion of issues about which people differ today. Just because a problem discussed in Scripture is no longer a problem today does not mean that the biblical treatment of that problem is irrelevant to us. Then move on to tell the students that the remainder of the quarter will be devoted to a survey of the Ten Commandments, and that today’s topic is idolatry, as summed up in the first two commandments. Then ask them what idolatry is, and ask them to give you some examples of it. Though they may give some examples from other religions and other lands, they are probably sharp enough to realize that idolatry is a problem even for those who do not bow down before statues of stone or wood. As soon as the class is able to reach a consensus on this matter - and it shouldn’t take very long - turn them to the First Commandment and today’s first question.

1. Whom Should I Worship?

Your students should already have arrived at the conclusion that the First Commandment's prohibition of idolatry requires one to put God first. The consideration of two related questions may help them to understand a little more fully what that means.

A. What is a God?

In order to understand what God means when He says that we are to put no other gods before Him, we must first know what a god is. Don't let your students get away with a circular answer like, "A god is something that you worship." Worship in what way? By probing and drawing them out, help your students to understand that a god can be anything to which a person gives absolute priority. Whatever is most important to you, whatever is the final decisive factor when you make decisions about spending money or using time, that thing or person is for you a god. The God of the Bible demands that all be done to His glory. He wants to be the deciding factor in everything His people do. Remind them also, from the lesson three weeks ago, that God desires more than mechanical obedience. He wants His people to love Him.

B. How Exclusive is the First Commandment?

Be sure the students also understand that it is possible for a person to be a polytheist - a worshiper of many gods. Pagan idolaters worship many gods by compartmentalizing their lives. One god is the god of the weather, another is the god of health, another the god of agriculture, etc. Many sophisticated Westerners do the same thing, however - even some who profess to be Christians. They may worship God at church on Sunday, but money becomes their god when they go to work and pleasure becomes their god at home.

Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 6:24 that no man can serve two masters. God is more than the God of the church or the God of Sunday. He is everywhere, and sovereign over all things. He wants no competition, even on a part-time basis. Does this mean that Christians must spend their entire lives doing "religious things"? What does it mean to put God first in everything? Make sure your students understand that what God requires is that we not only do the right things, but do them for the right reasons. If we do good things for selfish reasons, we are still sinning by putting another god (in this case, ourselves) before God. God cares not only what we do, but why we do it. This doesn't mean that people can't ever relax or have fun. What it does mean is that when the Christian relaxes, he does it to take good care of the body God has given Him, to take pleasure in the beautiful world God has made, and to develop edifying relationships with other people. Are these the kinds of things that motivate us?

2. How Should I Worship?

Now move on to the Second Commandment. Ask the students how it differs from the first in its prohibition of idolatry. If they are unable to see the difference, point them to the incident of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32. Make sure they understand that what this commandment is prohibiting is the worship of the true God in the wrong way.

How do people today worship the true God in the wrong way? Visible representations of God are still prevalent (such as the crucifix used in Catholic churches). But far more prevalent are mental images of God that are the products of human effort rather than divine revelation. Ask the students if they have ever talked to someone who said, "I can't believe in a God who would allow such and such a tragedy to occur, or who would send people to hell." Help them to understand that such a person has fabricated a mental

image of God, and then rejects the true God when He does something that does not fit the person's own mental image. No person has the right to choose what sort of God he would like to believe in. God exists, and to choose to believe in a god that is different from the way God has revealed Himself to be is to worship an idol - and idol of the mind.

The next question that comes up, of course, is, "What way is the right way to worship God?" For the Israelites in the Old Testament, that question was easy to answer. God had given them detailed instructions for worship that take up a major portion of the books of Moses. Most of those detailed instructions were for rituals that were fulfilled in Christ, however, as the book of Hebrews makes clear. The instructions of the New Testament are far less detailed and explicit. The New Testament writers tell us, for instance, that God's people should gather together, that they should do it on the first day of the week, that they should read the Bible, pray, and sing praises to God, preach and teach the Word of God to one another, and that money should be collected for the ministry of the church. They also tell us how the church should be organized in terms of its leadership. The content and generality of these instructions allow us to draw two fundamental conclusions about the present application of the Second Commandment.

The first conclusion is that we are not free to neglect those things God has instructed us to do when we worship Him. A person who is a Christian may not neglect the church, for instance. A person who says he can worship God in the woods by himself, or at home in front of a radio or television, is violating God's own standard for how He wants to be worshiped. Churches also cannot neglect the ministry of preaching and teaching for some contemporary approach that may seem more relevant.

The second conclusion is that the expression of the requirements for New Testament worship in terms of general principles rather than specific details allows us a certain measure of freedom in carrying out things such as praising God through music. Churches should not pretend that things not required by Scripture are somehow written in stone - matters such as order of worship and scheduling of services, style of music, etc.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by encouraging the students to put God first in a conscious way in the coming week. Ask them to test themselves as they make decisions to see if they are really doing everything to the glory of God, or if they are compartmentalizing their lives and trying to serve two masters. Also encourage them to keep learning more and more about God from His Word so they can worship Him as He is.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

PUTTING GOD FIRST

1. What is a god?
2. When God said, “You shall have no other gods before me,” did He mean that other gods could have lesser priority in our lives? Why or why not?
3. Name some gods that people sometimes put before God today?
4. Of the gods you listed in the previous question, which one is the hardest for you to resist?
5. Why was the Golden Calf a violation of the Second Commandment?
6. How would you respond to a person who told you, “I don’t have to go to church to worship God”?
7. Why is someone who says “I can’t believe in a God who would send anyone to hell” violating the Second Commandment?
8. What are some of the things the New Testament tells us we must do when we worship God?

PURITY OF SPEECH

Lesson Aim

To help students understand and apply the Third Commandment to their own lives.

Memory Verse

Matthew 5:19 - “Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

Lesson Background

“You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.” The Third Commandment speaks literally of not using the name of the Lord in an empty or meaningless way. While the commandment clearly prohibits the use of God’s name “for emphasis” - what we call profanity - it goes far beyond that. The lesson will point out other ways in which people can use God’s name in a meaningless way, even in worship and prayer. Jesus’ comments in Matthew 5:33-37 also allow us to expand the force of the commandment to include words that are substituted for the name of God, or for terms considered vulgar or profane. But while the lesson will devote a significant amount of time to the negative uses of the tongue that the Bible condemns, it is also vital to present to your students the positive side of the Third Commandment. The true test of Christian speech is that of edification. Christians are to speak in a way that brings honor to God and builds up others. By the time you are finished this lesson, your students should understand that their speech is evaluated, not only for its absence of degrading language, but also for the presence of that which is beneficial to others.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by describing for your students the practice of the Pharisees known as “fencing the law.” The Pharisees of Jesus’ day were so concerned that the people not break the law of God that they would devise “traditions” with the intention of helping people avoid situations where the violation of God’s law might be possible. For instance, much of the Jewish kosher legislation was derived from a rather obscure prohibition in Leviticus against boiling a kid in its mother’s milk (probably an idolatrous practice among some of the Canaanites). The rabbis reasoned that, since many people no longer raised their own goats, but bought their food in the marketplace, someone might inadvertently buy meat that had come from a young goat and milk that had come from its mother and cook the two together, thus violating God’s law without knowing it. The sure way to avoid the problem was to forbid making dishes that contained both meat and dairy products. Furthermore, since housewives in those days did not always clean the dishes very thoroughly and some sediment might be left from one meal to the next, each household should have two separate sets of crockery, one for meat products and one for dairy products. Orthodox Jewish households still observe these traditions today, though they are pure human inventions with no relationship to the Word of God. It was traditions such as these that brought Jesus’ most severe criticism upon the Pharisees.

Another example of fencing the law relates to the subject of today’s lesson, the Third Commandment. The Third Commandment tells us not to misuse the name of the Lord. We have already seen in previous lessons that the Jewish rabbis had a propensity for understanding the laws of God in the narrowest possible way. With this one, they restricted it only to the name of God contained in the commandment itself - the name *Yahweh*. They then fenced the law by telling people that the best way to avoid misusing the name *Yahweh* was not to use it at all. Thus the Jews would substitute other names of God (such as *Elohim* or *Adonai*) for the name *Yahweh*. Even when they read the Scriptures in the synagogue, they would substitute *Adonai* for *Yahweh*. In fact, when the vowel markings were added to written Hebrew by the Massoretes in the fifth century after Christ, they wrote the vowel markings for *Adonai* underneath the consonants for *Yahweh* just to remind people to substitute the one for the other when reading aloud. As a result, when some Christians in the Middle Ages became interested in the original languages of the Bible and started studying the Old Testament in Hebrew, they tried to pronounce the consonants of *Yahweh* using the vowel sounds of *Adonai*, not realizing what had happened to the manuscripts. The result was the word *Jehovah*, which is not really a Hebrew word at all. God, of course, did not intend us to remove one of His names from our vocabulary when He gave the Third Commandment. What did He mean for us to do?

1. The Right Use of Language

While the Third Commandment, like most of the others, is expressed in negative terms, the Bible does communicate to us the positive requirements that make up the other side of the coin. The flip side of the Third Commandment is found in Ephesians 4:29. Paul tells the Ephesians that the opposite of corrupt speech is edifying speech. Make sure your students understand that edifying speech is that which builds others up. Take a few minutes at this point to talk about the “put-downs” that are so commonplace in our language, particularly among teenagers. Why do people insult one another “for fun”? Do not be surprised if your students attempt to justify such language by claiming that “everybody knows we don’t mean anything by it.” Remind them that words can hurt others deeply, and often they hide the hurts because they don’t want to reveal their sensitivities to those who tease them. Christians must care enough about others to refrain from tearing them down, even in casual speech. You never know how much your words are hurting another person, even if he appears to be laughing along with you. Encourage your students to think before they speak. Idle words are often the ones that do the most harm. And when they think, they should ask themselves the question, “Is what I am about to say going to help the person to whom I am speaking?”

2. Wrong Uses of Language

The Third Commandment focuses on the wrong use of language, and so must we. What are the kinds of language that the Third Commandment forbids?

A. Profanity

The commandment clearly rules out the use of God's name for emphasis. All Christians should realize that the use of exclamations like "Oh, my God!" and "Jesus Christ!" are strictly forbidden. One should not use God's name lightly.

B. Thoughtless Use of God's Name

It is not merely the profane who misuse God's name, of course. Many Christians violate the Third Commandment by using God's name in their worship and prayers without giving the slightest thought to what they are doing. How many times have you sung a hymn of praise to God while your mind was a thousand miles away? Does that not constitute using God's name in an empty way? What of those people who use "Lord" or "Father" as a punctuation mark in their prayers? Your students need to understand that using God's name without thinking about or addressing God in sincerity is every bit as much a violation of the Third Commandment as swearing.

C. Circumlocutions

A circumlocution is the use of one word as a substitute for another. Literally it means to "talk around" something. Often circumlocutions are used as a matter of courtesy, such as when polite words are used in place of uncouth ones for describing certain bodily parts or functions. People also often use circumlocutions as substitutes for profanity - words such as "gosh," "gee," "darn," "heck," etc. [Look these up in your dictionary, and you will find that they are no more than corrupted forms of "God," "Jesus," "damn," and "hell."] Are the substitutes acceptable for Christians to use?

Have your students turn to Matthew 5:33-37. When we looked at this passage a few weeks ago, we saw that the rabbis had developed a hierarchy of oaths, maintaining that using substitutes for the name of God was not as serious as using God's name itself. Though the passage speaks of vows rather than profanity, Jesus nonetheless explains that a person should not expect to get off the hook of responsibility for using God's name if he substitutes something else in place of it. Similarly, Christians should realize that they cannot escape the charge of profanity by substituting circumlocutions for prohibited speech.

D. Exclamations

What of exclamations that are neither profane nor substitutes for profanity? What does the Bible say about meaningless expressions of emotion like "Holy cow!" or "Good grief!" Emotion in itself is not wrong, of course, and neither is expressing it. There are, however, sinful and righteous emotions. We may safely conclude that, concerning the use of meaningless exclamations, the words partake of the sinfulness or righteousness of the emotion being expressed. If the emotion is sinful, the words used to express it are likewise wrong. If the emotion is honoring to God and the words do no more than communicate that emotion, they are equally acceptable.

E. Vulgarity

While the Third Commandment does not address the matter of vulgarity, we must acknowledge that vulgar speech does not pass the test of edification presented in Ephesians 4:29, nor does it pass the test of purity and beauty given in Philippians 4:8. Unwholesome language (“dirty words”) is totally inappropriate coming out of the mouth of a Christian (James 3:9-12 is also applicable here).

We should also note that, unlike profanity, vulgarity is culturally conditioned. There is no moral reason why, of two words describing the same bodily function, the Anglo-Saxon word should be thought of as dirty and crude while the Latin word should be considered polite. In fact, the Norman conquest of England in 1066 determined such usage. The Saxon peasants were looked upon as barbarians by the French-speaking Norman invaders, and to this day the English language that resulted from the combination of their two tongues considers many words of Anglo-Saxon origin to be vulgar and words of Latin origin to be polite and cultured. Differences can be seen even in the way language has changed over the last few hundred years. The King James Version of the Bible uses some language that obviously was not considered vulgar in the seventeenth century, but that is considered so today (get an old KJV and look up I Samuel 25:22 for an example). The fact that vulgarity is culturally conditioned does not make it any more acceptable for the Christian, however. His testimony in the world demands that his speech be pure.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by encouraging your students to watch their speech carefully. The greatest enemy of pure speech is talking without thinking. While James acknowledges the difficulty of controlling one’s speech, the Christian has the comfort of knowing that the Holy Spirit is there to help him do what is not humanly possible on his own.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

PURITY OF SPEECH

1. What is “fencing the law”? Why did the Pharisees of Jesus’ day think it would help the people keep God’s law? Why did Jesus criticize the Pharisees for it?
2. What is edifying speech? Why is it important for Christians to speak to one another in an edifying way?
3. What damage can be done by “friendly” insults and put-downs?
4. What is a circumlocution? How do Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:33-37 indicate that words used in place of the name of God are still wrong?
5. How can a person judge whether the use of a particular exclamation is right or wrong?
6. What does Philippians 4:8 teach us about the use of vulgarity?

WORK, REST, AND WORSHIP

Lesson Aim

To help students understand and apply the teachings about work, rest, and worship in the Fourth Commandment to their own lives.

Memory Verse

Matthew 5:20 - “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Lesson Background

Among American Christians at large, the Fourth Commandment often tends to be ignored or overlooked. While that has certainly not been the case in Reformed circles, where if anything the subject has too often been overemphasized to the point of divisiveness, the fact remains that it is important that your students get a balanced understanding of what the Fourth Commandment requires of them. This is all the more the case because we live in a society that tends to abuse both work and leisure.

The primary focus of the Fourth Commandment is on the use of the seventh day, which is designated by God for rest and worship. While the New Testament never directly speaks of the Lord’s Day as the Sabbath, the change of worship from the seventh day to the first in the New Testament would indicate that, for the Christian, the Fourth Commandment applies to the Lord’s Day. The fact that the commandment sets aside a day of rest is intended by God to be a blessing through a temporary alleviation of the curse of wearying labor associated with the Fall. The day is also dedicated to worship. The church over the centuries has too easily fallen into the same legalism that consumed the Pharisees of Jesus’ day with regard to the

Sabbath. In so doing, many have made the Lord's Day a burden rather than the blessing it was intended to be. Your students need to learn the joy of resting from the work that their responsibilities require of them and giving themselves to the worship of God.

The Fourth Commandment deals with more than the seventh day, however. In talking about the rest required on the seventh day, it also speaks of working on the other six. Too often people get the idea that one day a week belongs to God while the other six are ours to do with as we please. The commandment to work implies that all our time belongs to God, and we should work to glorify Him six days a week every bit as much as we give ourselves to worship and enjoy the blessing of rest on the Lord's Day. In short, the Fourth Commandment deals in a comprehensive way with the Christian's use of time. The extent to which your students have disciplined themselves in this area probably will depend to a large extent on the families in which they have been raised. Parents who teach their children to keep on top of their work, complete assignments on time, and plan carefully so that work need not be done on Sunday have established a good model for the application of the Fourth Commandment in the lives of their children. Too many young people today, however, think nothing of leaving their homework until Sunday night because they have been wasting time on Saturday. Your students need to learn to use their time in a way that honors God.

One final note should be sounded at this point. Christians differ widely in their application of the Fourth Commandment. While I will include some specifics in my treatment of the lesson material, it is important that you fill in specific examples for use with your students based on the application of the commandment taught in your church and the needs of your students as you know them. Do not let what God intended as a great blessing become a burden to your students or a source of division among believers.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking the students what they are and are not permitted to do on Sunday by their parents. I suspect that most of what you get in response will fit into the "not permitted to do" category. While it is not unusual for teenagers to chafe at restrictions, remind them that God intended the Sabbath as a day where people could enjoy the pleasure of not having to do certain things rather than as a day that people suffered through because they were not allowed to do certain things. The Pharisees of Jesus' day had placed so many restrictions on the Sabbath (remind your students about "fencing the law") that they not only made people's lives miserable but even went so far as to accuse Jesus of sin for such horrible offenses against God as healing people. The Sabbath is not intended to be a legalistic burden. How did God intend the Fourth Commandment to be a source of blessing to His people?

1. The Fourth Commandment and the Seventh Day

The Fourth Commandment is based on the model established by God at the Creation, when He worked for six days and rested on the seventh. In the commandment itself, we are told not only to avoid work on the Sabbath, but also that the day belongs to God. The Sabbath command thus requires two things on the seventh day.

A. The Blessing of Rest

People don't like to work, but they like even less being told they can't do it. From the Jews of the first century to Christians in the twentieth, people have chafed under the restrictions against work on the Sabbath. But God intended this commandment to be a blessing. In Genesis 3, when Adam sinned, part of the curse was the fact that labor that had been enjoyable before now became a burden. Every time Adam

worked the land, he would be reminded of the misery he had brought upon himself by his sin against God. Despite the fact that we continue to live in a sinful world, however, God has given an island of rest to His people. On one day out of seven, it is no longer necessary to be reminded of the curse by suffering the frustration of burdensome work. God knows that our bodies need rest, and was kind enough to provide for that rest in His law. This is why Jesus could say that “the Sabbath was made for man.”

Having said this, it would be very easy for the discussion to get sidetracked into all sorts of secondary issues. For instance, some astute student may notice that we do not observe the seventh day as a Sabbath. Do not get bogged down in this issue. Simply explain that the practice of the New Testament church, which according to all indications we find there worshiped on Sunday in commemoration of Jesus’ resurrection, provides the basis for the change of day from Saturday to Sunday. If any questions come up about specific practices (Is it okay to watch television on Sunday? do homework? take a part-time job?), save them until the second half of the lesson.

B. The Blessing of Worship

The other part of the blessing that God gives to His people on the Sabbath is the blessing of devoting their attention to Him and spending time with His people. Worship and fellowship are to be joyful times, not burdensome duties, thus this aspect of the command is also intended for our good. Anyone who looks upon church as a burden would be miserable in heaven. Scripture describes it as a place of eternal praise to God and fellowship with His saints.

One other point should be noted in this section. While rest and worship are intended to be blessings of the Sabbath day, they are not synonyms for the same thing. Too often Christians have fallen into legalism by identifying rest with worship and concluding that the only appropriate type of rest on the Sabbath day is worship. While Christians may differ on the details of application here, we need to avoid the kind of legalism that robs the Sabbath of its joy and makes worship itself a burden, particularly to children and young people upon whom the legalistic standards of adults are often imposed.

2. The Fourth Commandment and the Other Six Days

Have your students turn to the Fourth Commandment in Exodus 20:8-11. Point out that verse nine says something that people often miss. While everyone realizes that the commandment talks about how to spend the seventh day, few notice that it also gives directions for how to use the other six. God tells us that the other six days are to be spent working. This does not mean that the five-day work week is a violation of Scripture, nor does it mean that people should never relax or take vacations. It does mean, however, that God intended His creatures to engage in productive activity six days out of the week. The activity of the six days, like the rest of the seventh day, is to glorify God. Because this, too, is something God intended for the good of His creatures, abuse in one direction or the other is harmful to man.

A. The Abuse of Work

America today is full of workaholics. For your students, this is not likely to be a problem. Teenagers are far more likely to be obsessed with leisure than with work. There are some, however, who in a few short years will be taking part-time jobs. If those jobs require them to work on Sunday, or force them to put their homework off until Sunday, or make them so tired that they can’t get up for church on Sunday, they will be running afoul of the Fourth Commandment. The obvious result of such practices will be the sort of spiritual decline that comes from inattention to the things of God. The consequences of the abuse of work are not likely to be readily apparent in other areas quite as quickly, however. Because teenagers tend to be

physically resilient, they will not suffer the same consequences that overwork visits on adults. They may not miss the blessing of rest of which they are depriving themselves. However, they are establishing patterns that will surely be harmful later in life. God's provision of rest is a protection against the physical and emotional burn-out that afflicts far too many people in today's world.

The abuse of work is not just a problem for the future, however. Some of your students may already find themselves doing homework on Sunday, and thus depriving themselves of the rest God intended. How does this happen? For the most part, it is not overwork, but poor planning and lack of self-discipline. If our time belongs to God, the principle of stewardship requires that we make good use of all our time. It is as wrong to waste time as to waste money (see the verses in Proverbs dealing with the sluggard), and those who fail to plan and discipline themselves to follow those plans are wasting a precious resource given to them by God. Such waste is a violation of the Fourth Commandment, and is thus sin.

B. The Abuse of Leisure

It is far more likely that your students are abusing leisure than that they are abusing work. Most people today have the relationship between work and leisure completely reversed in their minds. Instead of resting their bodies to be able to work more effectively, they work in order to finance their leisure, caring little about whether the leisure in which they engage makes their work less effective.

Jesus knew that rest was needed. He and His disciples made an extraordinary effort to get away by themselves after He had sent them out on a preaching tour of Galilee. It took them awhile to shake the crowds that were constantly following Jesus, but they finally did succeed in getting away for a much-needed rest. The purpose of the rest, however, was to refresh them for renewed labor. Work was the goal for which they were resting; rest was not the goal for which they were working. In fact, the only sense in which rest is to be the goal for which Christians work is the sense in which our efforts are directed toward the rest God has promised His people in heaven (Hebrews 4). Our lives here are lives of toil, for which rest renews us.

It is also important that your students understand that rest is not intended to be selfish or useless. When Jesus talked about the proper uses of rest in Mark 2:23-3:6, He indicated that leisure time is appropriately spent in deeds of necessity (eating grain) and mercy (healing the sick). The rest pictured here is not laying around doing nothing or indulging oneself in useless pleasure, but instead doing those things that are beneficial to you and others.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by encouraging the students to be good stewards of their time. Time is a gift of God and should be used for Him. Wasting time is sinful, and Christians should avoid it at all costs. Also remind them that work is to be done to God's glory and rest is to be received as a blessing from Him. While the ultimate goal of the Christian is rest in heaven, we all need to realize that rest is not a goal here on earth, but a means by which we may labor for God more fruitfully.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

WORK, REST, AND WORSHIP

1. How did the Pharisees of Jesus' day make the Sabbath a burden to the people?
2. In what two senses did God intend the Sabbath to be a blessing?
3. How is the rest of the Sabbath day a temporary release from one aspect of the curse of the Fall?
4. What does the Fourth Commandment have to say about the other six days of the week?
5. Why is it a sin to waste time?
6. Is it better to say that we rest in order to work or that we work in order to rest? Why?

RESPECTING AUTHORITY

Lesson Aim

To help students understand and apply the teachings of the Fifth Commandment to their own lives.

Memory Verse

Matthew 22:35 - “One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question.”

Lesson Background

If the Decalogue can be divided into two tables, one dealing with God and one with man, the Fifth Commandment is the transition point between the two tables. It essentially deals with the concept of authority. Parents and all other human authorities derive their power from God, who is sovereign over all. The way people respond to the authority of God will to a large extent determine how they respect the authority of those over them on earth. Conversely, the way people treat those in authority over them on the earthly level is often a good indication of how seriously they take the authority of God in their lives. Though the commandment may legitimately be applied to a wide range of earthly authorities, its main application to your students will be in the area of their relationship to their parents.

In examining the commandment, we will note its positive nature (in contrast with the negative form of most of the others) and help students to understand that such a positively-phrased command is in some ways more demanding than the ones expressed in negative terms. We will also talk about the promise associated with the command and discuss what that means for them.

The most crucial aspect of the commandment, however, is its boundaries. Middle school students are at the point where they are feeling increasingly uncomfortable with the whole idea of submission to authority. At this stage in life, many adolescents become rebellious and difficult to handle at home and at school. You probably experience some aspects of this in dealing with them in Sunday School as well. Your students need to understand that increased maturity is no excuse for rebellion. Adults are as much under authority as children are. Their authorities take different forms, of course, and they in addition exercise some measure of authority over others, but they are nonetheless under authority in numerous ways. A person never outgrows his need to submit to those over him. A discussion of Ephesians 6:1-4 in its context should help the students see that this is true.

Students also need to understand the limitations of parental authority. Few of them will find themselves in a position any time soon of saying, “We ought to obey God rather than men,” but they need to know that such stands are sometimes necessary. When any human authority contradicts God’s authority by demanding behavior that would be sinful, the Christian must refuse to comply. This requires discernment and knowledge of God’s Word. If your students are to be prepared to make this sort of judgment in future years, they need to familiarize themselves with God’s Word and what it requires.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking your students if it is ever right to disobey one’s parents. Allow them to discuss the question and encourage them to give examples. Don’t allow the discussion to degenerate into silly or unrealistic examples like, “You should disobey them if they tell you to jump off a cliff,” or other similarly intelligent responses. Do not attempt at this point to answer the question, but tell your students that you will return to it later in the lesson. Instead, have them turn now to the Fifth Commandment in Exodus 20:12.

1. The Demands of the Fifth Commandment

When the students have turned to Exodus 20:12, ask them what makes the Fifth Commandment different from all the rest. If they are not able to discover it for themselves, point out to them that the Fifth Commandment is the only one expressed in purely positive terms. Eight of the ten begin with “You shall not,” while even the Fourth Commandment contains a negative element (“On it you shall not do any work . . .”). Does this make the Fifth Commandment more or less restrictive? Is it easier or harder to obey than one expressed in negative terms? Allow them to kick this question around for a while and help them to see that a commandment that tells you what you must do is more restrictive than one that tells you what not to do, but leaves the field open otherwise. For instance, if the Fifth Commandment had said, “You shall not despise your father and mother,” it would have allowed indifference. Since it requires honor, however, indifference is not an option.

Next, ask them what it means to honor your parents. Two ideas that ought to surface quickly are respect and obedience. Help them to see that God demands not only that children do what their parents say, but also that they have a positive attitude toward them. Like the other commandments, God cares about attitudes as well as actions. As before, if one of your students brings up a situation where he thinks that disobedience is justified or that respect is impossible (“Yeah, but what about . . .”), tell him to hold off until later in the lesson when that issue will be addressed directly.

2. The Promise of the Fifth Commandment

Another aspect of the Fifth Commandment that makes it unique in the Decalogue is the fact that it contains a promise of blessing for those who obey it. It would appear that God is promising long life to those who obey their parents (and Paul reiterates this promise in Ephesians 6). How can this be? Everyone can surely think of examples of those who have honored their parents and yet died young. What exactly is God saying here?

Some would suggest that the temporal promise associated with the command is given only to Israel, since they were the only ones who were given land by God. Such an interpretation does not hold up in the light of Paul's repetition of the promise in the New Testament, however. Others have proposed that the promise be understood figuratively in terms of spiritual blessing - in other words, one who obeys his parents will receive long (eternal) life in heaven. In my opinion, however, the promise here is saying that one who honors his parents will receive long life in relation to what his life would have been had he not honored his parents. Good family relationships provide the basis for a stable and peaceful life. Those who generate family conflicts will create tensions for themselves and others that will ultimately shorten their own lives. In a sense, then, those who honor their parents live longer than those who do not.

3. The Limits of the Fifth Commandment

Now, finally, we are ready to tackle the question of when, if ever, it is appropriate to disobey one's parents. Have the students turn to the familiar passage in Ephesians 6:1-4. When Paul says that children should obey their parents "in the Lord," what does he mean? Does he mean that children are only obligated to obey their parents when they are Christians, or only when they are reasonable?

Note that the discussion of children's obedience comes right in the middle of a longer treatise on submission to authority - wives to husbands, children to parents, and slaves to masters. The same general principles apply in all cases. Those under authority are to obey as if they were obeying God, not their masters. Thus they obey even when their masters are not looking, and respect their masters even when they are unworthy of it (see I Peter 2:18). For children, this means that they are to obey their parents even if their parents are unsaved, and even if they are unreasonable in their demands. They are to do it because they want to honor God by obeying those under whom God has placed them.

Of course, there are situations where those in authority must be disobeyed. The classic example is found in Acts 5:29, where the apostles refused to stop preaching when the Sanhedrin commanded them to be silent. Daniel, who prayed to God even when King Darius decreed that men should pray only to him, was also disobeying human authority justifiably. The conclusion we must draw here is that human authority may indeed be disobeyed, but only when to obey the human authority would be to disobey God. Since it would be relatively unusual for the parents or teachers of your students to require them to do something sinful, they are unlikely to face such a choice in the near future. The important thing for them to remember at this point is that ungodliness or incompetence in a person in power is not a sufficient reason for disobedience. Students should obey, respect, and submit to a poor teacher, not because the teacher deserves it, but as a show of respect for God and His law. Similarly, parents are to be obeyed and respected even when they make mistakes and when their decisions seem unreasonable or unfair. Such behavior pleases God.

In addition, you should take a few minutes to point out that those in authority are accountable to God for the way they handle their responsibility. Husbands are accountable for the way they run the house, parents for the way they raise their children, teachers for the way they run the classroom, rulers for the way they lead a country, and employers for the way they run their businesses. Their accountability is to God - He is the one who will judge those who lead poorly and reward those who lead well. In fact, those who

exercise authority bear greater responsibility before God and will receive greater judgment if they fail to exercise it honorably (see James 3:1; Luke 12:48). But the responsibility of the one under authority is not to judge those over him, but to leave that judgment in the hands of God and to give to those under whom God has placed him the respect and obedience that God requires.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by reminding students that they will always be under authority of some kind. You may want to underscore this by listing some of the authorities under which you yourself must submit - federal, state, and local governments, police, employers and supervisors, and church elders, among others. What they are learning now by honoring their parents will apply all their lives. Remind them, too, that obedience and respect are to be motivated by love for God and a desire to obey and honor Him.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT RESPECTING AUTHORITY

1. In what sense is the Fifth Commandment a transition between the first part of the Ten Commandments, which deals with man's responsibility to God, and the second part, which deals with man's responsibility to man?
2. What makes the Fifth Commandment different from all the others?
3. Which is harder to obey, a positive commandment ("You must . . .") or a negative one ("You may not . . .")? Why?
4. What is the promise associated with the Fifth Commandment? What does it mean?
5. When is it permissible to disobey parents or others in authority?
6. What are some wrong reasons that people sometimes use to excuse disobedience to those in authority?
7. Why should a Christian respect and obey even authorities that are unreasonable or incompetent?

CONTROLLING ANGER

Lesson Aim

To help students understand and apply the teaching of the Sixth Commandment to their own lives.

Memory Verse

Matthew 22:36 - "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Lesson Background

As we arrive now at the second table of the law, we come upon a series of commandments about which Christians often allow themselves to become rather comfortable and complacent. After all, most can rather easily affirm that they have never killed anyone, committed adultery, or stolen something from someone else. It is precisely this type of thinking, of course, that contributed to the self-righteousness of the Pharisees in Jesus' day. They interpreted the commandments in such a narrow way as to make them comfortable with their own lives while allowing them to condemn others. Jesus' criticism of them, in turn, shows us how these commandments ought to be interpreted and applied.

Our subject today is the Sixth Commandment. When we looked at Matthew 5, we saw that Jesus applied this commandment to anger, hatred, and insulting words as well as actually ending a person's physical existence. The point of contact that ties all of these together is that man is a creature made in the image of God. Because this is true, any assault against the image of God in man is an attack against God Himself. It matters little whether the assault is physical, verbal, or attitudinal - if someone treats another person in a way that undermines the dignity of his humanity, he has launched an assault against the image of God.

The elaboration and application of the Sixth Commandment lends itself to a discussion of numerous current social issues, including such matters as abortion, capital punishment, war, euthanasia, and genetic engineering. However, while some of your students may have some curiosity about these issues, such questions are unlikely to hit them where they live at this stage of their lives. Consequently, we will devote our time to attacks against God's image that are far more typical of middle school students - anger, grudges, and prejudice. By the time the lesson is done today, your students should understand that such behavior is a violation of the Sixth Commandment - as serious a matter to God as if actual murder had been committed - and should not characterize the life of a Christian.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the class by asking your students what a "drop-dead look" is. Have a few volunteers demonstrate for the class. It will soon be obvious that such a look communicates anger, dislike, and a contempt for the recipient of the glare. Then ask your students if they have ever heard the expression, "If looks could kill . . ." What about that old standard, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me"? The existence of such expressions in the English language indicates the harm that can be done to another person with a dirty look or an unkind word. Jesus, however, is not so unrealistic as the originators of these popular expressions. As we saw in Matthew 5, He made it quite clear that angry looks and hurtful words *are* just as serious as murder. Have your students turn to Matthew 5:21-22. Tell them that, while today's topic is the Sixth Commandment, we need to expand our horizons beyond the act of physical murder. Explain to the class the connection between the Sixth Commandment and the image of God as set forth in the Lesson Background, then tell them that today you will be looking at various violations of the Sixth Commandment that are far more common than snuffing out someone's life.

1. Anger

Jesus specifically addresses the matter of anger in these verses. Some might notice that a footnote in the NIV indicates that the phrase "without cause" is found in some manuscripts of verse 22. Ask your students if there is such a thing as anger without sin. The answer, of course, must be yes, because God Himself is said to get angry. Note in passing, however, that righteous anger is relatively rare. Such anger is motivated by the glory of God (see Moses in Exodus 32 or Phinehas in Numbers 25). The vast majority of our periods of anger are selfish - we get mad because something didn't go the way we wanted it to go. Such anger is sin.

A. Expressed Physically

Jesus deals with the physical expression of anger in Matthew 5:39. The Christian is not to retaliate physically for wrongs done to him. I personally do not believe this rules out self-defense, but there is a difference between self-defense and retaliation. Ask your students what causes fights in school, or perhaps with their brothers and sisters at home. The cause is always anger, and that anger, if analyzed, will be seen to stem from selfishness. Jesus does not want His people to strike out physically when things do not go their own way. He, of course, provided the perfect example of how He wanted His followers to behave. In His trials before the Jewish authorities, He was shamefully abused but refused to strike back, either physically or verbally. The alternative He presents is to do good even to those who seek to harm us.

B. Expressed Verbally

Jesus speaks of insults in the same breath as murder in Matthew 5:21-22. No matter what the expression about sticks and stones may say, insults hurt. The verbal assassination of another person, either to his face or behind his back (gossip), is an attack against the image of God. Make sure your students understand that such verbal attacks come from the same sources as fighting. A person who insults another often does so to retaliate for a wrong done by the other person. Gossip is another way of getting even. In James 3, James calls the tongue a deadly poison and a blazing fire. How can this small but unruly part of the body be controlled? The answer is found in Galatians 5:22-23. Self-control is the result of the Holy Spirit working in the life of the Christian. Only the Holy Spirit can keep us from the sin of verbal murder.

C. Expressed Non-Verbally

At this point, refer your students back to the lesson introduction. Ask them for some other ways in which anger can be expressed non-verbally besides the murderous look. They should be able to come up with some good answers - ignoring another person, turning one's back on him, refusing to talk to him, looking down one's nose at him, etc. While some may think that such approaches are sterling examples of self-control in comparison to fighting and insults, ask your students if these things are really any less painful than the more overt expressions of anger. Clearly they are not. The Fifth Commandment required honor to parents; indifference violates it every much as overt disobedience. With the Sixth Commandment, the cold shoulder is just as bad as a slap in the face. God demands that we love our neighbors.

2. Grudges

Another aspect of the problem of anger is handled by Paul in Ephesians 4:26-27. We saw in the previous section that it was wrong to express feelings of anger, either physically, verbally, or non-verbally. Paul tells us that it is also wrong to hold those feelings in and let them turn into grudges and bitterness. Make sure your students understand what a grudge is. Then ask them what they think Paul means when he says that holding anger in "gives the devil a foothold." Help them to realize that Satan is able to take our bad thoughts about others and bring them to the point where they dominate our lives and lead us into all kinds of sin.

If we are not to express angry feelings or hold them in, what should we do? Jesus gives the solution to the problem back in Matthew 5:23-24. He tells us there that the proper thing to do with angry thoughts and feelings is to go to the person at whom they are directed and make things right. Make sure your students are aware of the procedure laid out for this in Matthew 18:15-17, though you really don't have time to go over it in any detail today.

3. Prejudice

What is prejudice? It involves looking down on others, not usually as individuals, but because of the group to which they belong. Such a group could be racial, social, or economic. In any case, prejudice is another way in which people attack the image of God in others. James deals with this in James 2:1-13. The prejudice of which he speaks is economic - apparently some of the people to whom he was writing treated the rich preferentially and snubbed the poor. He implies in verse 11 that this is another form of murder. Ask your students what kinds of prejudice they see in action in their schools and neighborhoods. The following should be included in any discussion of the subject.

A. Racial Prejudice

Racial prejudice has been a serious problem in our country for a long time. It also continues to be a major problem in most churches (though most churches will not admit to any racial prejudice, the large majority of churches in America continue to be segregated by race for the most part; admittedly, part of this has become cultural through many years of development in different directions by black and white churches). Your direct contact with the problem will depend to a large extent on where you live. In any case, your students need to be encouraged to make an effort to overcome any racial prejudice that may be ingrained in their neighborhoods or schools. God does not want us to shun people because they are different.

B. Class Prejudice

Schools that are not multiracial or have harmonious racial atmospheres still often struggle with economic prejudice. The way this shows up most clearly is in the matter of clothing. Clothes are often a status symbol to adolescents (and often to adults as well, unfortunately). Your students certainly are aware of instances at school where someone was mocked by others because of his or her clothing; surely they know people who consider themselves better than others because they wear more expensive or more fashionable clothes. Remind your students that, in the same way that God looks not on the outward appearance, but on the heart (or else David would never have been chosen king - I Samuel 16:7), so they should judge others by what they are, not what they wear.

C. Cliques

Perhaps the most insidious form of prejudice with which adolescents struggle is the clique. Being part of the "in group" is the desire of many teens, and the drive for popularity often causes them to compromise their values and confuse their priorities. Whether your students are part of the "in group" at school or not, however, they need to realize that God wants them to behave in such a way as to draw others in, not keep them out. Jesus spoke against just this sort of exclusive attitude in Luke 9:49-50.

Conclusion

There is no better way to conclude today's lesson than the way James concludes his discussion of prejudice in James 2. Have your students read verses 8-13. The Royal Law - love for others - is God's alternative to murder in all its forms.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

CONTROLLING ANGER

1. Why does Jesus equate anger, hatred, and insults with murder? What do they have in common?
2. What is righteous anger? How does it differ from sinful anger?
3. What are some ways you have expressed anger to others in the past week? How should you have handled those situations?
4. Why is it wrong to keep anger inside you? What should you do instead?
5. Why is prejudice a form of murder?
6. What kind of prejudice is most common in your school? What can you do to show that you don't accept this popular prejudice?
7. What is a clique? Why do people want to be part of one? Why are they wrong?

BIBLICAL SEXUALITY

Lesson Aim

To help students understand and apply the teachings of the Seventh Commandment to their own lives.

Memory Verse

Matthew 22:37 - “Jesus replied, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’”

Lesson Background

Talking about sex is awkward enough under any circumstances; talking about sex with middle schoolers can be downright intimidating. It used to be the case, years ago, that lessons on sexuality with middle school students would involve no more than a brief discussion of dating and issues such as holding hands and kissing. Today, however, an alarming number of young teens in our country are sexually active, as the high rate of pregnancy among teenagers indicates. You may not have anyone in your group who fits into this category, but on the other hand you may. Even if you don’t, however, it is vitally important to “close the barn door before the horse gets out.” In other words, your students must be prepared to handle sexual temptations before they face them. To do this, they must have a biblical view of sexuality. That is our goal for this lesson, as we use the Seventh Commandment as a starting point.

Lesson Procedure

To a large extent the success of the lesson introduction will depend on how much rapport you have with your students. If they are comfortable with you and willing to talk about how they really feel, even though the subject may be an uncomfortable one, then the lesson should get off to a good start. If not, you may find yourself treading water for a while. Try starting the lesson by asking your students why they or their friends at school (to distance it a little from them and make it a little less threatening) enjoy talking about sex. If they are honest, they will admit that it smacks of the realm of the forbidden, and gives an aura of maturity to those who discuss it. Young teens will often boast about alleged sexual exploits to impress their friends with how “grown up” they are, and will make jokes containing sexual language and images in order to suggest that they are familiar with something that basically makes them uncomfortable. Help your students to understand that such behavior comes because many people have taken the low view of sex advocated by the secular world. The media try to picture sex as just another form of recreation, something to be engaged in for casual pleasure. They imply that such behavior is natural, and that anyone who is uncomfortable about it must have something wrong with him. The only way to gain security about this touchy subject is to understand it from God’s point of view.

1. God’s Plan for Good Sex

Though the title may be a little startling, we are not talking about details of sexual behavior here. What your students really need to know are the biblical principles that undergird a proper view of human sexuality. If they understand sex in the proper context, it will give them the basis upon which to live rightly. Of course, we all realize that most people approach sex with their glands rather than their minds; the second part of the lesson will deal with that problem.

A. Sex is a Gift of God

Have your students turn to Genesis 1:28. Ask them what the verse implies about sex. They should easily be able to figure out that God intended the people He had made to have sexual relations with one another. Sex is not something dirty; it was part of God’s creation, and is included in Genesis 1:31, where God said that all He had made was very good.

B. Sex Has Several Purposes

Genesis 1:28 indicates that one of the purposes for sexual activity is the propagation of the race. God designed this as the way in which new people would be brought into the world. But procreation is certainly not the only purpose for which God created human sexuality. Genesis 2:24 tells us that sex is intended to unite a man and a woman - physical union is an expression of the complete bringing together of two personalities into one new family unit. Though I would not advise having your students turn to it in class, you might also make note of the fact that the Song of Solomon provides a very strong argument for the conclusion that God intended sex as a source of pleasure for men and women.

Why, then, is sex such a source of confusion and guilt among people today? The reason is because of man’s sin. Genesis 2:25 tells us that Adam and Eve were naked without shame before the Fall, but in Genesis 3:7, we find that sin brought with it shame and guilt. Like all of God’s other good gifts, man in his sin has abused sexuality and made what God intended to be pure and good to appear dirty and shameful instead. When sex is practiced outside of God’s boundaries, it becomes dirty and produces guilt; when it is practiced as God intended, it can still be something beautiful and pleasurable. What, then, are those boundaries within which sex is a good and beautiful thing?

C. Sex is Intended for Marriage

The purposes for which God created sex only find their proper fulfillment in marriage. Genesis 2:24 tells us that sex was part of the total unity of Adam and Eve as husband and wife. Sex was never intended to be practiced outside the context of marriage. When it is, the Bible uses words for it like adultery, fornication, and prostitution, and calls it sin. It is an indication of the corruption of our society that such things no longer carry the stigma of sin and are becoming more and more widely accepted.

Why should sex be restricted to marriage? The fact that God said so should really be reason enough, of course, but several illustrations might help your students to understand the issue a little more clearly. On a baseball field, a baseball bat can be an instrument of pleasure and beauty. The crack of ash on horsehide is one of the most beautiful sounds of spring for the baseball fan and player. But off the field, that same bat can be used as an instrument of destruction by thugs who rob and maim. What was intended for pleasure can cause great damage when used for a purpose other than that for which it was intended. In the same way, sex can do terrible harm when used in some way other than that for which God designed it.

The Bible also gives us illustrations that show the damage that can be done by practicing sex outside of marriage. Ask your students to come up with some examples. The first and most obvious should be David and Bathsheba. Their illicit sexual encounter led to the murder of Bathsheba's husband and the death of their child. Another example is furnished by Abraham and Hagar. Though what they did was perfectly legal, it certainly went beyond God's design for marriage. The result, of course, was Ishmael, the founder of a nation whose people have been at war with the sons of Abraham for almost four thousand years.

Samson is another good example. His lust got him into trouble more than once, and in the incident with Delilah, cost him his ministry, his eyesight, his liberty, and his life. One mistake in the area of sex can be costly indeed. David, Abraham, and Samson are not the only ones in history whose lives have been changed by a single sexual encounter. Many of your students probably know girls who have gotten pregnant and have had to leave school, disrupting any plans they may have had for the future. Certain religious leaders who have had their ministries ruined by illicit sex can also serve as reminders of the life-changing damage done by sin in this area. The only conclusion we can reach is that God's way is best. When He says that sex is only for marriage, we must realize that taking the bat away from the ballfield will not only constitute sin, but also do harm to ourselves and others.

2. Threats to Good Sex

If sex rightly belongs within the context of marriage, what are some of the things that threaten the proper exercise of this good gift of God? More specifically, what are some of the areas your students need to be aware of in order to please God in this matter?

A. Extramarital Experience

We have already seen that sex outside of marriage is harmful to those who practice it. God makes it clear in the Seventh Commandment (Exodus 20:14) that adultery is wrong. Again, the fact that it displeases God should be enough to cause Christians to want to avoid it, but often the hardness of our hearts requires the addition of practical benefits as well.

The fact of the matter is that sexual experience outside marriage is a hindrance to enjoyable sex within the context of marriage. God intended sex inside marriage to be enjoyed without guilt. But how can someone who has tasted the fruit of sexual experience with someone else beforehand give himself to his

spouse freely and with a clean conscience? There will always be the nagging pain of having been united to someone else, and often this guilt hinders a couple's sexual union for a lifetime.

Even prior sexual experience with the person to whom one is married can be damaging. If sex is the expression of the total commitment of one person to another, how can one trust the commitment if the experience had been shared before the commitment was finalized? A person who is willing to take advantage of another for his own sexual pleasure outside of the permanent commitment of marriage may find that the same person is unable to accept the reality of the commitment once it is made. Far from enhancing marital sex, premarital sex causes psychological damage that may keep the partners in a marriage from trusting one another fully and thus sharing themselves fully with one another. When our society tells us that sexual experience outside marriage makes sexual adjustment inside marriage easier, they are selling us a bill of goods.

B. Sexual Lust

In Matthew 5:27-28, Jesus explains that the Seventh Commandment extends to thoughts and attitudes as well as actions. While this should come as no surprise to us after the other things we've studied in this unit, it is something that needs to be emphasized to your students. Having fairly recently reached puberty, they are dealing with changes in their bodies and their thought processes that they may not really know how to handle. Many young teens become preoccupied with sex at this stage of life. They need to know that God cares about their thoughts as well as their behavior. In order to apply this commandment to their lives, however, they will need to understand what Jesus means by lust. While the word is used elsewhere in Scripture to speak of a legitimate desire, in this passage it refers to a desire that, if carried out to its logical conclusion, would result in a sinful act. Lust, then, is the desire for forbidden sexual activity. As was the case with murder, the act never occurs apart from the prior thought and desire. Even though the desire may never lead to the act, it partakes of the sin that clings to the action itself.

C. Sexual Temptation

The key to good sex for your students, then, is to keep themselves pure for marriage. This involves several things to which they should give their attention.

In the area of action, those who may be dating should avoid getting themselves in physical situations where they may be tempted to violate God's law against premarital sex. That means spending time with other people, and not getting into lonely, dark, or isolated places where the pull of the glands may be too much for the conscience to overcome.

In the area of desire, your students should realize that they need to avoid those things that attempt to stimulate the kinds of desires that Jesus condemns in Matthew 5:27-28. They are surrounded by books, magazines, music, movies, and television programs that are specifically designed to stimulate lust. The fact of the matter is that those who play with fire usually get burned. Sexually-oriented entertainment will lead them into sin, not only in their minds and hearts, but often in practice as well. If they learn to say no at this point, they will find it much easier to control themselves when they are older and the temptations become even greater.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by reminding your students that God intended sex to be beautiful. If they are to enjoy the pleasure that God made for His children, they must commit themselves to keeping away from the counterfeit pleasure promised by the world. In the same way that a cheap diet soda tastes sweet but leaves a bitter aftertaste, so the sex offered by the world seems fun for the moment, but leaves a lifetime of bitterness and guilt behind it.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

BIBLICAL SEXUALITY

1. Why did God give the people He created the capacity for sexual activity?
2. How does sex fit into God's purpose for marriage?
3. Why is sex inappropriate outside of marriage?
4. What are some of the ways in which premarital sex can be harmful?
5. What is lust? How is it related to the Seventh Commandment?
6. What are some of the ways you can avoid the temptations that would generate the lust forbidden by Jesus?

RESPECTING OTHERS' PROPERTY

Lesson Aim

To help students understand and apply the teachings of the Eighth Commandment to their own lives.

Memory Verse

Matthew 22:38 - "This is the first and greatest commandment."

Lesson Background

Stealing is another one of those sins that most "good kids" never think of as being a problem for themselves. Sure, the "bad kids" will pilfer things from stores or raid other students' lockers at school, so the Eighth Commandment applies to them. But most kids have never stolen anything in their lives. Why should they worry about the Eighth Commandment?

As with the Sixth and Seventh Commandments, however, the Eighth is broader than the specific overt act to which it refers. While hatred and anger are the roots of killing and lust is at the heart of adultery, greed and lack of respect for the property of others are the attitudes that cause people to steal. It is with these attitudes that we must deal in our lesson today. It is also important for your students to realize that stealing does not necessarily involve material objects. Cheating on an assignment or test, for instance, is stealing the work done by someone else.

It is also important for you as a teacher to help students see that the Eighth Commandment makes a positive as well as a negative demand. In the same way that the opposite of killing is not indifference to others but love even for enemies, so the opposite of stealing is not leaving the property of others alone, but

working hard in order to be able to give to those who are in need. In other words, while God condemns the person who cares more about his own needs and desires than those of others, so that he steals what belongs to them, God blesses the one who cares more for others than he does for himself, and shows it by using the fruit of his own labors to meet the needs of others.

Lesson Procedure

If you can manage it, take one of your students' Bibles or purses before class begins and hide it without the knowledge of any members of the class (if this is impossible, secure the cooperation of the "victim" and get him or her to play the part of the innocent). The student should quickly notice that the article is missing, and stir up some commotion. The response of the group will probably include teasing the unfortunate student for carelessness or forgetfulness, while the student whose property is missing will begin accusing others in the class of playing some sort of trick. Let this go on for a few minutes, then return the missing article and use it to initiate a discussion of stealing. Why is stealing wrong? How would you feel if something of yours was stolen? Why do people steal things from others?

1. Kinds of Stealing

People normally think of stealing only in terms of taking something that belongs to someone else. Ask your students if it is possible to steal something non-material. They should be able to come up with some ideas, but if they don't, help them out with the following:

A. Ideas

Sometimes people steal the ideas of others and claim them as their own. This is what happens when students cheat in school. If a person steals an answer from another student, he is claiming as his own an idea that belongs to someone else. The same sort of thing occurs when students copy something out of a book when writing a paper. Such behavior is called plagiarism, and involves using another person's words and ideas without giving credit to that person. Note also that such practices constitute lying, and thus violate the Ninth Commandment as well.

B. Time

How is it possible to steal time? One way is by wasting time that belongs to someone else. A worker who goofs off on the job is stealing from his boss. Of course, since all our time belongs to God, any wasting of time is stealing from Him. Another way to steal time is to waste other people's time by your own behavior. A person who is perpetually late steals the time of others by forcing them to wait for him. Similarly, a student who causes a disturbance in class is stealing time from the other students because they are not able to learn while the teacher takes the time needed to deal with the disturber of the peace.

C. Attention

Children (and sometimes adults as well) often do things to attract attention. This is particularly true in a setting where many people are present. Brothers and sisters are notoriously competitive in this area. A person who must constantly be the focus of attention is thus a thief, stealing attention from those who need it. Everyone needs some attention, of course, but it is wrong to draw attention to yourself constantly, or in inappropriate ways (I'm sure your students could come up with some good examples of this from school).

2. The Attitudes Behind Stealing

In Victor Hugo's classic novel *Les Misérables*, the hero Jean Valjean is hounded throughout his life by the vengeful Inspector Javert who is after him for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving family. Though certainly some do steal out of hunger, such noble motives are by far the exception rather than the rule.

A. Greed

Those who steal out of greed simply want what someone else has so badly that they are willing to take it from him. Those who feel this way obviously believe that material things are important for their happiness. Like the Rich Fool in Luke 12, they think that owning more and more will satisfy them. Though few of your students may have stolen from someone else, they all struggle with acquisitiveness. Each one has in his life something of which he simply cannot get enough, whether it be some collectible item (baseball cards, stamps, etc.), clothing, or even money itself. Greed is the sin behind stealing in the same way that lust is the sin behind adultery.

B. Envy

Some also steal out of envy. The motive here is not so much to gain for oneself as to get back at the other person who has it. When the motivation is directed against the other person rather than toward oneself (Why should *she* have one of those if I can't have one?), then greed has been compounded with envy. Note that here we begin to trespass on the ground of the Sixth Commandment, because envy almost inevitably leads to hatred.

C. Laziness

Some steal out of laziness. This is particularly true of some of the kinds of stealing we talked about earlier in the lesson. Cheating, plagiarism, lateness, and time-wasting are often symptoms of laziness in a person. A lazy person almost always becomes a thief because he winds up depending upon others for what he should have done himself.

D. Lack of Respect for the Property of Others

Perhaps the most conspicuous example of the kind of stealing that stems from lack of respect for the property of others is vandalism. Those who destroy or deface what belongs to others clearly have no respect for what does not belong to them. While your students may not go around spray-painting buildings or bridges, the same motive often shows up in the way they treat the property of others on a smaller scale. For instance, how do they treat the books and desks that belong to their school? Do they throw books around, write in them, and leave them uncovered? Do they write or carve in their desks? Do they throw paper on the floors and in the hallways? What about at home? Do they take good care of the furniture and rugs? Are they careful not to spill things? Make sure they understand that lack of respect for the property of others is tantamount to stealing because, when they destroy others' property, they cause them to incur extra expense and labor to compensate for the damage that has been done. The students should also be aware of the fact that caring for borrowed things fits into this category. When they borrow something from someone, they should take care to return it in the condition in which they borrowed it; if they fail to do so, they have in effect stolen something from that person.

3. The Opposite of Stealing

Ask your students what they think is the opposite of stealing. They will in all likelihood either sit there with blank stares, suggest that the opposite of stealing is to leave other people's things alone, or make some wisecrack (when confronted with this question, my 12-year-old responded, "Unstealing?"). Have them turn to Ephesians 4:28 and ask the question again. Paul teaches here that the opposite of stealing is not leaving other people's things alone, but giving to others what belongs to you. Tie this in with what Jesus said in Matthew 5 about loving one's enemies and note that such love is the true opposite of killing. In the same way, giving is the opposite of stealing. Make sure the students understand that this covers the area of motives as well. The one who steals is always putting his own needs and desires above those of the person from whom he is stealing; the one who gives is putting the needs of others before his own. This is what the Eighth Commandment requires of us.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by encouraging the students to watch out for the symptoms of greed in their own lives, to avoid laziness, and to show respect for the property of others. More importantly, however, they need to orient their lives in an outward direction so that they are more concerned for others than for themselves. When they develop this kind of attitude, they will find themselves giving rather than stealing. Of course, we must realize that such an attitude cannot simply be conjured up by an act of the will. Only the Holy Spirit of God is able to take a fundamentally selfish human being and turn him into one who wants what is best for others.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

RESPECTING OTHERS' PROPERTY

1. What are some of the ways people can steal without actually taking a physical object?

2. How do lateness and wasting time constitute stealing? How are they examples of selfishness?

3. How is cheating a form of stealing?

4. If hatred is the attitude that leads to murder and lust is the attitude that leads to adultery, what is the attitude that leads to stealing?

5. How can laziness lead to stealing?

6. How is carelessness that leads to the damaging or destruction of the property of others a type of stealing?

7. What is the opposite of stealing?

8. What contradictory attitudes underlie stealing and giving?

TELLING THE TRUTH

Lesson Aim

To help students understand and apply the teachings of the Ninth Commandment to their own lives.

Memory Verse

Matthew 22:39 - “And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Lesson Background

While few of your students may have been involved in overt acts of murder, adultery, or stealing, you can be sure that all of them have lied at one time or another. When James talks about the difficulty of controlling the tongue, he has in mind more than bitter, angry, or critical words. Lying is such a convenient way out of tight situations that many people find it difficult to resist. When Jesus says that His followers should let their yes be yes and their no be no, He is demanding something that is not easy.

Lying takes many forms. It is possible to lie simply by remaining silent when such silence gives a false impression. It is also possible to deceive by expressions or body language. A person can also deceive someone else by his actions. All such deceptions are condemned by the Ninth Commandment.

One of the things that makes the discussion of lying such a difficult one is that not everyone would agree that lying is always wrong. The situation is made considerably more difficult by the fact that several biblical narratives seem to countenance deception (the lie told by the Israelite midwives in Egypt; Rahab’s lie to protect the spies; Samuel misleading Saul about his purpose for visiting Jesse and his family at Bethlehem; Elisha’s lie to the Syrian army at Dothan; Joshua’s deceptive military strategy at Ai). While I

have no intention of getting into a discussion of the ethics of espionage or military strategy, nor of examining the above passages in any detail, I do believe it is important to clear the air with your students about this issue of relativism. To our society at large the matter is hardly worthy of discussion; people simply assume that truth is relative, and may be bent or twisted to achieve whatever they consider to be a greater purpose. Christians, however, must stand against this moral relativism and be known as people of integrity. Such a stand honors God and establishes the basis for trust in relationships with other people.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by having the students imagine what it must have been like to live in the Netherlands during World War II. The country was occupied by the Nazis, who were trying to exterminate the Jewish population of Europe while at the same time cracking down on any who opposed them. Your family believes it is part of their Christian duty to protect Jews from the Nazis who are trying to ship them off to concentration camps. As a result, you have taken in a family of Jewish refugees and are hiding them in a secret room in your basement. Suddenly, you hear a loud knock at your door. You open it to find a squad of Gestapo agents who demand to know whether you are harboring Jews in your home. Realizing that if the Jewish family is discovered, you may very well share their fate, what do you do? Though some of your students will probably suggest it, opening fire on the Nazis with a concealed submachine gun is not a live option. Try to keep the discussion serious. Do you lie? Do you try to deceive them without literally lying? Do you invite them in to search the house? Do you tell them the truth and turn the Jews over to them? What does God's Word require of a Christian under such circumstances? This should stimulate some good discussion. After they have talked about the specific incident for a while, turn the conversation in a more general direction by asking your students if it is ever right to lie.

1. Is Lying Ever Right?

In the Ninth Commandment, God forbids giving false testimony against one's neighbor. Does this only mean a person must be truthful in court? Jesus shows us that the demand for truthfulness is much broader in Matthew 5:33-37, where He requires absolute truthfulness in light of the rabbinical hierarchy of oaths. But there is something far more fundamental than these verses that we need to consider when dealing with this topic. Remind your students that we saw at the beginning of the unit that the Ten Commandments are not arbitrary standards, but are instead expressions of the character of God Himself. We know that God is Truth. Jesus said that He was the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Nothing less than absolute truthfulness will measure up to the standard established by God's character.

We cannot leave this section without at least mentioning Rahab, however. In Joshua 2:1-7, Rahab hides the two Israelite spies in Jericho, then lies to the soldiers who come looking for them (remarkably similar to the Jews in the basement, isn't it?). Rahab is rewarded for her deed (Joshua 6:17) and commended as a hero of the faith (Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25). Doesn't this show that lying is sometimes permissible when it is in the service of a higher good? It may seem like a technicality, but it is important to note that Rahab was commended for her faith, not her lie; she was praised for the fact that she chose to follow the Lord rather than the gods of the Canaanites, not for the way she put that choice into practice. It is important to note that Jephthah is also cited as a hero of the faith, but no one claims as a result that God approves of human sacrifice.

The key principle your students need to understand here is the one enunciated in I Corinthians 10:13. God never puts His people into a situation where sin is unavoidable. There is always a way out. So often the dilemmas used to support the necessity of lying under certain circumstances are hypothetical situations,

or at least real situations in which all the alternatives cannot be known. God never forces His people to disobey His law. There is always a way of escape that does not involve lying.

2. Why Do People Lie?

Open this one up to your students. I'm sure they will be able to come up with some good ideas here. As they make suggestions, write them on the board and evaluate them, showing why each is an insufficient justification for lying. Be sure to include the following:

A. To Cover Up Sin

Surely the most common reason for lying is to cover sin. Biblical examples include Aaron (with the Golden Calf), Achan (note that his was a silent lie), and Ananias and Sapphira. Not only is such a lie compounding the sin already committed, but it usually requires further sin on top of that. The larger and more tangled the web of deception becomes, the more likely it is that the person himself will become ensnared in it. Lying rarely puts off the consequences of sin for long, and when the sin is finally discovered, the consequences are usually far worse than they would have been originally because of the other sins that have been perpetrated in order to conceal it. Even if, as happens in rare circumstances, a lie succeeds in concealing sin from human eyes, your students should realize that it is impossible to hide a sin from God. The One who judges all men cannot be fooled.

B. To Protect Someone Else

This can occur in one of two ways. In the first situation, a person lies to keep the sin of someone else from being discovered (an alibi witness who lies about the whereabouts of the guilty party on the night of the murder, for instance, or a student who lies to hide his friend's cheating). This fits into the same category as lying to protect yourself, although in a sense it is worse, because the liar is encouraging his friend to perpetuate the wrong he has done rather than helping him to make it right.

The second example of this sort of lie is when a person lies to his friend in order to protect him. In this case, the person decides that the truth would be too much for his friend to handle and shields him by keeping the truth from him. An example might be where a family member keeps the news of a terminal illness from the patient to protect him from the shock. Though such lying might be done with the best of motives, note that someone who tells such a lie is implying that he knows better than God. After all, God is the one who told us not to lie. Can a person legitimately suggest that to obey God would be cruel or harmful, but to follow his own feelings on the matter would be far better? I'm not suggesting that a person should be cruel or tactless ("I think that new hairdo is the ugliest thing I've ever seen. Did you stick your finger in a light socket, or just drop a radio into your bathtub?"), but there are kind ways of speaking the truth. Note also that the truth may legitimately be concealed from those who have no right to know it, though this should be done without lying.

3. Different Ways of Lying

Your students need to be aware of the fact that there are many ways in which a person can lie. Besides speaking overt falsehoods, a person can lie by telling a partial truth in a deceptive way (politicians are great at this; diplomats do it for a living). In response to the question, "Did you do your homework?", "Yes" is not appropriate if you only did three out of twenty math problems. "Did you clean your room?" does not deserve a positive response if what used to be in the middle of the floor is now stuffed under the bed.

People can also lie while remaining silent. Sometimes the refusal to answer a question implies that the person does not know the answer, or even worse implies that the answer is the opposite of the truth. To allow such a misapprehension to go unchallenged is the same as lying (again, this statement assumes that the questioner has the right to know the information for which he is asking). Even a rude questioner should not be deliberately deceived, however. If necessary, he should simply be told, in a polite way, of course, that the matter is none of his business.

A person can also lie through gestures or body language. A quizzical expression can convey the idea that the answer to a question is obviously negative (the old “What kind of a stupid question is that?” expression), but is tantamount to lying if the true answer is a positive response and the person is simply trying to avoid the question. Similarly, an expression that says “I don’t really mean what I’m saying” can be a tactful, but lying coverup for a true statement (this occurs most frequently when someone expresses criticism in the form of a joke).

4. What Harm Does It Do?

The term “white lie” has been coined to express the idea that not all lies are really harmful. They may be wrong, according to this kind of thinking, but they don’t really hurt anybody. The fact of the matter is that all sin hurts, including lies of any kind. Why is this true?

The first and most basic thing to consider is that lies are an offense to God. Like any sin, lies fall short of God’s perfect standard and insult the One who is Truth. A Christian who claims to love God should not want to do anything that would offend Him.

Secondly, lying damages the reputation, and thus the testimony, of a Christian. The Christian is supposed to be one who displays to the world the character of Christ. When the Christian lies, the world loses respect for the Christian’s Lord.

Thirdly, your students need to realize that lying always destroys relationships. The reason for this is that it breaks down trust. In order for people to develop sound relationships, they must trust one another. A single lie can destroy the trust established by a thousand truths, and a thousand more truths may be unable to reestablish that trust fully. A child who lies to his parents may find them unwilling to trust him in the future. One who betrays confidences may find that friends will no longer speak about the things that are really important to them. A husband or wife who lies to his or her spouse may find that the atmosphere at home becomes almost irretrievably awkward or cold.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by reminding your students that the followers of Christ are to be those who say “yes” when they mean “yes” and say “no” when they mean “no.” A person who has a reputation for honesty will stick out in this world where deception is so common and will be valued as a friend and advisor. Such a person will also bring glory to the God he serves. Encourage your students not to fall into the trap of little lies that is so seductive and tempting, yet can be so destructive, both in their lives and in their relationships with God and with other people.

1. Are there times when lying is acceptable if it prevents a worse sin, or is lying always wrong?

2. Was Rahab wrong to tell the men of Jericho that the Israelite spies were not in her house when in fact she had hidden them on her roof?

3. What are some of the reasons why people tell lies?

4. Is it possible for a lie to be an act of kindness when the truth would hurt a person?

5. Is it a good idea to criticize a person in a joking way so that you get your point across without people thinking that you really mean it?

6. How is it possible to lie without saying a word?

7. How does lying damage a Christian's testimony?

8. How does lying damage relationships between people?

THE IMPORTANCE OF RIGHT ATTITUDES

Lesson Aim

To help students understand and apply the teachings of the Tenth Commandment to their own lives.

Memory Verse

Matthew 22:40 - "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Lesson Background

We have spent quite a bit of time during this quarter making the point that the Decalogue, and indeed the law of God as a whole, applies to attitudes as well as overt actions. As we complete the quarter this week, we arrive at the only one of the Ten Commandments that makes that emphasis on attitudes explicit. When the Tenth Commandment says, "You shall not covet," it goes straight to the heart. In fact, in Romans 7:7 Paul speaks of the Tenth Commandment as being the one that really opened his eyes to his own sinfulness. As a Pharisee, he had been convinced of his own righteousness because of his outward observance of the laws of God, at least according to the narrow interpretation given them by the Pharisees. When he took time to look at the Tenth Commandment, however, he could no longer deceive himself about his unrighteous condition. He suddenly saw that he was a sinner and in need of forgiveness from God.

We will try to accomplish three things in today's lesson. The first will be to help the students understand what it means to covet, looking at its selfishness and materialism by using the example of Achan. The second will involve the "flip side" of the Tenth Commandment - if covetousness is prohibited, what is required? According to Philippians 4, the virtue demanded by the Tenth Commandment is contentment. Finally, the lesson will use the Tenth Commandment as a vehicle for reviewing the material covered during

the quarter. This can be done because selfishness is at the heart of all sin, and thus all the commandments can be seen as being related to the last one, even as all tie in with the first - putting something else before God. Don't forget to remind the students that, while God's law is intended as a revealer of sin to the unbeliever and a standard of behavior for the believer, there can be no change of life or holy living apart from the grace of God.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking your students about window shopping. Why do they do it? How does it make them feel? What about television commercials and store catalogues? What kind of feelings are these intended to produce? By discussing these questions, move the conversation around to the issue of covetousness. Note that the entire advertising industry is designed to produce it, and there is something in each of us that is highly susceptible to temptation in this direction. It is in recognition of that tendency that God gave us the Tenth Commandment.

1. What Does It Mean to Covet?

When the Tenth Commandment says, "You shall not covet," what precisely does it mean? Your students should have little trouble arriving at the conclusion that to covet is to want what someone else has. But is the mere act of wanting it sinful in itself? While we would not be warranted in concluding that wanting is wrong in and of itself, there are certain kinds of wanting that are sinful, and thus qualify as covetousness. The first of these is the kind of wanting that is motivated by selfishness. If a person is considering only his own desires, with no thought for the needs or concerns of others (or the will of God, for that matter), he is guilty of covetousness. The second aspect of covetousness is a preoccupation with material things as an end in themselves. Jesus taught that material things were to be used to accomplish spiritual good (see Luke 16:1-9); when material things become our sole focus, we are laying up treasures on earth rather than in heaven.

An excellent example of what it means to covet is found in the story of Achan in Joshua 7. Verse 21 reveals something of Achan's attitude. Despite the fact that God had declared that all the goods of Jericho were to be devoted to Him, either by destruction or by being placed in the treasury of the tabernacle, Achan wanted what he saw in Jericho. His action is described as coveting because he put his own desires above the will of God and the welfare of the rest of the nation; he was materialistic in the sense that he went after material goods without concern for their spiritual consequences in his own life. In Achan's case covetousness led very directly to his death and the destruction of his family. How can covetousness destroy people today? Encourage your students to examine their own attitudes to see if their own lives are characterized by the sin of covetousness.

2. What is the Opposite of Coveting?

We have seen that negative commands imply positive responsibilities. When God says not to steal, He also says that we ought to give instead. If loving your enemies is the opposite of killing and giving is the opposite of stealing, what is the opposite of coveting? Allow your students to discuss this for a few minutes, though you may find they have little success in answering the question. Then have them turn to Philippians 4:4-13 and read the passage together. In what sense is contentment the opposite of covetousness? Make sure the students understand the following concepts:

verse 4 - Covetousness makes people miserable. One who covets is never satisfied, and thus is always unhappy. The only person who can really rejoice as verse 4 commands is the person who is content.

verse 5 - The person who realizes the fact that Christ could return at any time will not be preoccupied with material things. They will not become the basis for his happiness.

verses 6-7 - The covetous person also tends to be a worrier. If one is so preoccupied with material things that they form the basis for his happiness, he also will tend to worry endlessly about losing what he already has. This does not make for a great deal of peace of mind.

verses 8-9 - Rather than focusing on material things, the Christian is to think on those things that are truly lasting and worthwhile.

verses 10-12 - Paul's contentment has nothing to do with his material circumstances. His attitude is the same whether he is rich or poor, hungry or well-fed.

verse 13 - Such an attitude toward life is not natural, but comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ.

3. The Tenth Commandment as a Summary

Because the Tenth Commandment deals directly with the attitudes of the heart, it can also serve as a useful summary of the work we have done this quarter. In the same way that the First Commandment in a sense sums up the whole of the Decalogue, since any sin involves putting something else before God, so the Tenth is a summary because every sin is in some sense a manifestation of selfish desires. Have your students go through each of the first nine commandments, discussing how each may be seen as an outworking of the covetous desires of the heart. The results of your discussion should include the following ideas:

- First Commandment - Any time we put something before God, we are really putting ourselves and our own desires before God.
- Second Commandment - Worshiping God in a way other than what He has designated is again an example of putting my will before His. Such a person is saying, "Yes, I'll worship you, Lord, but it will have to be on my terms." Human desire surges to the forefront and pushes God back into a subordinate place.
- Third Commandment - Anyone who uses God's name in vain shows by doing so that he craves the attention of men, whether it is the pagan who swears or the Christian who wishes to appear pious but speaks with little actual thought of God.
- Fourth Commandment - One who violates the Fourth Commandment covets control over his time. He is unwilling to turn his life over to God and acknowledge that He is sovereign over how his time is to be used.
- Fifth Commandment - One who breaks the Fifth Commandment covets autonomy. That is simply a big word to communicate the idea that he doesn't like other people telling him what to do. Refusal to submit oneself to authority is the height of selfishness.

- Sixth Commandment - Violations of the Sixth Commandment are acts of selfishness because the person who becomes angry and nurses grudges is concerned largely for himself. He wants what he wants and cares little for anyone else. James 4:1-3 makes this point very effectively.
- Seventh Commandment - This is clearly one of the results of coveting your neighbor's wife. In any case, it involves a selfish grasping after what God restricted to the marriage bond for mutual benefit of husband and wife.
- Eighth Commandment - The application here is clear.
- Ninth Commandment - We saw last week that lying often comes from the desire to conceal sin. This urge for self-preservation is wrong if we care only for our own immediate safety and not for what God has said is right. The one who lies is putting himself before others, and thus is manifesting selfishness.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson with a reminder to your students that the Ten Commandments are not ways of earning a trip to heaven. They are intended to reveal man's sin and need of salvation and to show the impossibility of pleasing God apart from His grace. Those who are not Christians don't need to "try to be good" - they need Christ, who obeyed the law perfectly for His people and died to pay the penalty for their sin. Those in your class who are Christians need to obey Him out of love and gratitude, recognizing their dependence on the Holy Spirit to empower them to do what they cannot do alone.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

THE IMPORTANCE OF RIGHT ATTITUDES

1. What does it mean to covet?
2. Is it always wrong to want something? Why or why not?
3. What is the opposite of covetousness?
4. How did Paul show by the way that he lived that he was truly content?
5. How does an attitude of covetousness underlie the violation of each one of the Ten Commandments?