

Be Faithful. Don't take what isn't yours.

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4th in a six-part series

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Exodus 20:14-15 (CEB)

¹⁴ Do not commit adultery.

¹⁵ Do not steal.

Matthew 5:27-30 (CEB)

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, *Don't commit adultery.* ²⁸ But I say to you that every man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart. ²⁹ And if your right eye causes you to fall into sin, tear it out and throw it away. It's better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to fall into sin, chop it off and throw it away. It's better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body go into hell.

Hosea 2:13-20 (CEB)

¹³ I will punish her for the days
dedicated to the Baals,
when she offered sweet-smelling
sacrifices to them
and dressed herself up
with rings and jewelry,
and went after her lovers,
and forgot me, says the LORD.

¹⁴ Therefore, I will charm her,
and bring her into the desert,
and speak tenderly to her heart.

¹⁵ From there I will give her vineyards,
and make the Achor Valley
a door of hope.
There she will respond to me
as in the days of her youth,
like the time when she came out of
the land of Egypt.

¹⁶ On that day, says the LORD, you
will call me, “My husband,” and no
longer will you call me, “My Lord.” ¹⁷ I
will take away the names of the Baals
from her mouth, and they will not be
mentioned by name anymore. ¹⁸ On that
day, I will make a covenant for them
with the wild animals, the birds in the
sky, and the creeping creatures of the
fertile ground. I will do away with the
bow, the sword, and war from the land; I
will make you lie down in safety.

¹⁹ I will take you for my wife forever;
I will take you for my wife in
righteousness and in justice,
in devoted love, and in mercy.

²⁰ I will take you for my wife
in faithfulness;
and you will know the LORD.

1 Timothy 6:6-10 (CEB)

⁶ Actually, godliness is a great source of profit when it is combined with being happy with what you already have. ⁷ We didn't bring anything into the world and so we can't take anything out of it: ⁸ we'll be happy with food and clothing. ⁹ But people who are trying to get rich fall into temptation. They are trapped by many stupid and harmful passions that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some have wandered away from the faith and have impaled themselves with a lot of pain because they made money their goal.

What does it mean to love our neighbor? Be faithful and don't take from them.

This week, we return to the two tablets of stone on which God inscribed the Ten Commandments – his instruction for his people. As we've seen, the entire Law of Moses boils down to two commandments: Love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and love others (Leviticus 19:18).¹

A very helpful image to keep in mind when you reflect on the Ten Commandments is to see the first tablet as being concerned with what it means to love God: no other gods, no idols, keep his name holy, keep God's Sabbath. Thus, the second tablet is concerned with what it

¹ The instruction to “love your neighbor as yourself” in Leviticus, when given to the Israelites spoke to one's fellow Israelites. But, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus drove home God's larger teaching that “neighbor” extended even to those we see as our enemies, thus, to all. So, for Christians, “love your neighbors” and “love others” stand as synonymous.

means to love others: don't steal from them, stay faithful to your spouse, honor your parents, don't murder people, and so on. Two tablets: love God and love others. The last two weeks, we discussed the first tablet. This week, we move on to the second tablet – loving others. We are taking these a bit out of order, so we can talk about honoring our parents on Mother's Day (May 10). So, we begin with the commandments that prohibit adultery and theft.

Do not commit adultery

The union of one man and one woman, which we call marriage, is part of God's created order. It is more than a convenience or a means of managing finances. Marriage is God's gift to us. Marriage is God's grace at work. And it is God's gift to all people. It is important to see that marriage is not part of God's Law brought to the Israelites by Moses. Marriage is a gift bound up with the very creation of humanity. It is a gift even to those who do not know God. So, we shouldn't be surprised that a commandment to be faithful to one's spouse should make the "top ten list."

There is no better way to grasp the importance that God places on faithfulness within the marriage covenant than to reflect on the story of the prophet Hosea. I've always found it to be one of the most shocking and moving stories in the Bible. How much does God value covenantal faithfulness? You're about to see for yourself.

Hosea's story

The opening verses of Hosea certainly don't read like a love story. God tells Hosea this: "Go, marry a prostitute and have children of prostitution, for the people of the land commit great prostitution by deserting the LORD" (1:2). Can you imagine? Hosea is to go find an adulterous woman, marry her, and be a father to her children. Nothing about affection or courtship -- just go and do it.

The only portion of the book that deals with Hosea's personal life is 1:2-9 and 3:1-5. Even here, the Hebrew is ambiguous and scholars are all the over the place on how best translate it. Is Gomer a prostitute as some translations have it, or is she "merely" promiscuous? Is she promiscuous before she marries Hosea or only after? But if we keep in mind that we are getting the story of two relationships in parallel, Hosea/Gomer and YHWH/Israelites, then we can grasp the author's point.

Hosea is to enter into a marriage covenant with a woman who is not faithful to the covenant, committing adultery with other men. Similarly, God has entered into a covenant with the Israelites and they have been unfaithful to that covenant by committing adultery with foreign gods. The way the adultery makes Hosea feel is the way it makes God feel, but Hosea is to be faithful to Gomer as God is faithful to Israel. No wonder that God takes our faithfulness in our marriages so seriously.

Covenant betrayal and a surprising response

If you've spent any time with the Old Testament, you know that the people's idolatry, the worshiping of foreign gods and idols, was a BIG problem during the long decline of Israel and Judah. In the biblical view, this idolatry, along with the people's abandonment of social justice, explains the decline of the Israelite kingdoms and their eventual destruction.

The story of God's response to this covenant betrayal is also told through the marriage of Hosea and Gomer. God's expected anger, judgment, and punishment await the adulterous Israel (2:1-13). Yet, that is not the end of the story. We are also told that God will win Israel back by showering her with tender affection (2:14-23): "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her . . . On that day, says the Lord, you will call me 'My husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal'²." The same emotional playing out of betrayal, forgiveness, and restoration is found in chapter 11: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . . My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender, I will not execute my fierce anger . . . for I am God and no mortal, the Holy one in your midst, and I will not come in wrath." (11:8-9).

²Baal was the chief god in the Canaanite pantheon and a main subject of the Israelites' idol worship.

The over-arching Old Testament story is that of covenant betrayal, judgment, and restoration. Nearly every OT prophet comes bearing a word from God about the coming destruction of unfaithful Israel, but also brings a word of hope and restoration. The people will have to bear the consequences of their betrayal but God will one day restore them as his people, putting things right for them and for all of creation. It is this restoration (a.k.a. the coming of the kingdom of God) that the Jews are so anxiously awaiting in Jesus' day. It is the proclamation of God's kingdom, this restoration that occupied much of Jesus' ministry and was accomplished in his death.

We can see that this is somewhat like a marriage between a man and woman that has been rocked by unfaithfulness. It is hard and hurtful, marked by anger and despair. Yet, the couple makes it through, emerging on the other side with a marriage stronger than before. Is this really possible? With God, all things are possible!

True love

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson writes, "Hosea is the prophet of love, but not love as we imagine or fantasize it. He was a parable of God's love for his people lived out as God revealed and enacted it — a lived parable. It is an astonishing story: a prophet commanded to marry a common whore and have children with her. It is an even more astonishing message: God loves us in just this way—goes after us at our worst, keeps after us until he gets us, and makes lovers of men and women who know nothing of real love. Once we absorb this story and the words that flow from it, we will know God far more accurately. And we will be well on our way to being cured of all the sentimentalized and neurotic distortions of love that incapacitate us from dealing with the God who loves us and loving the neighbors who don't love us."

Do not steal

Ok. That's straightforward. Don't take what isn't yours. We learned this as small children. In fact, it is one of the first things we were taught. And most of us grow up to be law-abiding citizens who might have a few mistakes in our past but have foregone lives of crime as our way to provide for our families. Thus, it is easy to hear this prohibition and quickly move on the next. "Don't steal.' Got it.

But do we really get it? What could this commandment have to say to us? In their book on the Ten Comandments, Hauerwas and Willimon remind us that Christians have always known that this commandment speaks to us all. They write:

Thus, for Aquinas, theft can involve not paying wages that are due. A theft is any fraud in buying or selling. Theft is committed if anyone buys promotions to positions of temporal or spiritual honor, such as those who spend money campaigning for bishop.

Luther may even be more forceful than Aquinas in this matter, arguing that stealing is nothing less than acquiring any property by any unjust means. Luther begins with the assumption that the world is a system of thievery in which, of all the sins that possess us, thievery is the most common craft on earth. "If we look at mankind in all its conditions, it is nothing but a vast, wide stable full of great thieves" (The Large Catechism, 40). Luther observed further that, "Stealing is a widespread, common vice, but people pay so little attention to it that the matter is entirely out of hand. If all who are thieves, though they are unwilling to admit it, were hanged on the gallows, the world would soon be empty, and there would be a shortage of both hangmen and gallows" (p. 39).

Luther could make these quite startling claims because like Aquinas, he assumed that a person steals not only when he robs a person's strongbox or picks a pocket, but when "he takes advantage of his neighbor at the market, in a grocery shop, butcher stall, wine and beer cellar, workshop, and in short, whenever business is transacted and money is exchanged for goods or labor."

If it seems that Luther is being a bit harsh, he is merely echoing Paul in Philippians 2: "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (v. 4, NRSV) or as the CEB translators render it: "Instead of each person watching for their own good, watch

out for what is better for others.” Do Christians truly look out for the interests of the other guy wherever, as Luther put it, “business is transacted and money exchanged for goods or labor.” Granted we have lots of laws aimed at preventing outright fraud, but could we, in our own lives and businesses, do more to look out of the interests of our customer, our client, or our vendor?

Why can it be so hard to look out for the other guy in the world of trade and commerce? Because we want to succeed, to win, to get rich or at least richer.

The trouble lies in our hearts. Look again at what Paul writes to Timothy: “people who long to be rich . . . the love of money . . . craving money.” Longing, loving, and craving are all matters of the heart. Who or what do we love? Who or what do we long for? Who or what do we crave? Do we strive first for wealth or do we strive first for the kingdom? Is it God that we worship or is it our stuff, our wealth, our careers, our reputation?

Paul lived two millennia ago in a world far different from our own. But when it comes to the dangers of pursuing wealth, his world must have been much like ours. I have known too many people, many of whom claimed to be Christian, whose pursuit of wealth wrecked their lives and the lives of others. For many, their pursuit of wealth was successful. They achieved fat bank accounts, piles of stuff, and the status that goes with it. Yet, they also reaped lonely, isolated lives filled with brokenness and pain. One of my classmates from Harvard Business School served a long sentence in prison. So many temptations. So many harmful and foolish desires. So many bad choices.

“Do good . . . be generous and ready to share”

What is possible in life? What does it mean to *really* live? Admittedly, today’s passage from 1 Timothy is one that can make us uncomfortable. Across the New Testament there are many such passages, passages about the dangers of wealth. With one voice, the NT writers scream at us to run, run fast, from it. Indeed, there are so many warnings that it is easy for us to misread them.

James Dunn is one of the most prominent NT scholars working today. In his commentary on 1 Timothy,³ the section on 1 Timothy 6 is titled, “Putting Wealth in Its Place.” He didn’t entitle it something like, “No Wealth is the Only Good Wealth.” Wealth can be used for great and good purposes – but the challenge is to keep it in its place.

It is clear from the NT writings that there were wealthy Christians in the early church. Indeed, early Christians met in the homes of the most affluent members of the churches. Paul never condemns the wealth of the affluent per se, but he does warn them: “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains” (1 Tim 6:10). Or we could say that some Christians, in their pursuit of wealth have taken advantage of others.

I understand that there are very few people in this world who consider themselves to be rich. But I think we know that even in the context of America, many of us at St. Andrew are, to put it bluntly, rich . . . or at least in the ballpark. We know that Paul is speaking to us. As tempting as it might be for us to put our hope in our bank accounts and 401k’s, Paul urges us to put our hope in God, for it is God “who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (Timothy 6:17).

Contentment and the true heart

Paul gives Timothy two pieces of practical advice for avoiding the trap named “the pursuit of money, stuff, and status.” First, he urges Timothy to learn the art of contentment. Despite the numerous hardships of his own life, Paul has “learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need” (Philippians 4:11-12, a letter written from prison). How has Paul learned this? He has learned this from God. It is God who gives Paul the strength that he needs to be free from worry and anxiety.

³from Dunn’s commentary in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Abingdon Press, 2000.

Second, Paul urges Timothy to pursue a godly life rather than pursue wealth or possessions or status. Timothy has his life headed in the right direction, but there are many potential wrong turns and dead-ends ahead that will tempt Timothy and few of them are more attractive than the love of money. Timothy must ignore the traps, even stepping on the accelerator to hurry past them. He must actively pursue his life with God, never taking it for granted.

We live in an anxiety-filled world, where contentment and peace seem endlessly elusive. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Earthly possessions dazzle our eyes and delude us into thinking that they can provide security and freedom from anxiety. Yet all the time they are the very source of anxiety. If our hearts are set on them, our reward is an anxiety whose burden is intolerable.” And all the while . . . Jesus stands ready to take our burdens from him, if we will just loosen our grip on them and refuse to take, by any means, that which is not ours.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Adultery, having sexual relations with anyone other than one’s spouse, is one of the oldest taboos in the Bible. It even made the top ten list, alongside murder and theft. Why do you think this is so? What does the absolute prohibition against adultery teach us about marriage? Even if both spouses wanted to have some sort of “open” marriage (I think that is still the term!), the biblical answer would still be no. Why? Jesus goes further than Paul. If we think that we have avoided adultery by not engaging in the physical act, Jesus reminds us that it is our hearts that really matter. Energies, attention, and fantasies directed to someone other than our spouse diminishes our marriage. Do you agree? How might we go about ensuring that all our sexual energies are directed to our spouse?
2. Consider for a minute that God is willing to use marriage and faithfulness to that covenant as a metaphor for God’s relationship with his people, that is, with us. How is this metaphor helpful in understanding better our collective relationship with God? In living it? In your view, where does the metaphor begin to break down? In the New Testament, the church is sometimes described as the bride of Christ. Is this helpful to you? How?
3. Discuss how we can come to see that we are all potentially implicated in the prohibition against thievery. Read the few paragraphs on Luther again. Do you agree with him that any form of unfair advantage is what God has in mind? How can we know what is truly just in the world of commerce and trade? How do you think trade works in the kingdom of God – if at all?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday Leviticus 18 Holiness in sexual behavior. This is a long list of sexual taboos. God’s people are to be different from the people around them. (“Uncovering nakedness” in the NRSV is a euphemism for sexual relations).</p>	<p>Tuesday 2 Samuel 11:1 – 12:23 The story of David’s adultery with Bathsheba, the murder of her husband, and the death of their child.</p>
<p>Wednesday 1 Corinthians 5 Paul is presented with a shocking case of sexual immorality. Paul’s primary focus is on protecting of the Christian community, even if that means asking someone to leave the community</p>	<p>Thursday Luke 18:18-30 Jesus and the rich ruler</p>
<p>Friday James 5:1-5 James lashes out against exploitation by wealthy landowners who are probably not Christians.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

