



# Obeying God

## Advent Study

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### Introduction

Advent is a time of the church year to take an inventory of our spiritual lives, to examine ourselves to see how we're doing in our relationship with God. During this Advent Season we will be looking at the twelve most basic commands God has given us so that we can measure our lives against God's standards. Those twelve are the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) and the two given by Jesus in Matthew 22:37-40.

With regard to each of these twelve, we will first look at an example of someone who disobeyed the commandment and the next day at someone who obeyed it. Thus we will have both a bad example and a good one against which to measure ourselves.

Over the days that follow, in looking at people who disobeyed God, we will have an opportunity to consider some really evil characters, as well as those who were not such bad people but who had "blind spots" or other weaknesses of character that led them to succumb to temptation. Even among those who provide us good examples, we will find people who were not always perfect in everything they did. Thus, we have a picture of mankind in all our glory and failure.

There are those who would like to convince us that mankind is evolving into a race of people who will ultimately become kind and good and without the need of a Savior. As we go through this Advent study together, we will get a picture of life as it really is. The people in our day are just as capable of evil and of good as those in this series. They are a reflection of us. The key is that, regardless of our failures, because of what Jesus did for us, we can be forgiven, reconciled to God, and start all over again.

*R&D In what ways are people just as susceptible to sin in our day as they were in Bible times?*

*Prayer: "Test me, O Lord, and try me, examine my heart and my mind" (Psalm 26:2).*

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### Lesson 1

**Read: 1 Kings 11:1-13**

#### Other Gods

"I am the Lord your God...You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2-3). The First Commandment is not ambiguous. We are to honor God and no other. Solomon knew that in his youth. When he became king, succeeding his father David, his prayer to God and the humility he displayed in it (see 1 Kings 3:4-15) are classic examples of honoring God. As a result, God granted him wisdom, and Solomon has ever thereafter been revered for his wisdom.

As we see in our reading for today, however, things changed over time. Perhaps to consolidate his power by alliances with his neighbors, or maybe because he had an uncontrollable passion for women, Solomon ended up with 700 wives and 300 concubines! This doesn't appear particularly wise. Furthermore, it was in direct disobedience to God. God had told Solomon (v.2) not to intermarry with the foreign women of the neighboring tribes, but he had done so. God was trying

to build the Israelites into a nation that served the one true God, and He knew that intermarriage with foreign wives would result in divided loyalty.

It was not enough that Solomon had ignored God's specific command to him about intermarrying; he then went directly against the First Commandment by allowing his wives to influence him into worshipping other gods. What God knew would happen, happened. God's judgment was brought on Solomon as a result of his disobedience, and Israel became a divided kingdom in the years following Solomon's reign. What had started out so well ended in disaster because of disobedience to God's command.

Solomon's problem was that he took himself too seriously and God not seriously enough. In our day, we would say that Solomon began to believe his own press clippings. It is a sin we can all fall into, perhaps in less identifiable ways. When we believe any success we have obtained is because of how clever or talented or powerful we are, we have begun to worship other gods and not given God the honor that is only His.

*R&D In what areas of your life might you be in danger of "believing your own press clippings"?*

*Prayer: Lord, help me to remember that all I am and all I have come from the bounty of Your grace.*

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## Lesson 2

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**Read: Joshua 24:14-27**

### No Other Gods

Joshua is our good example of following the First Commandment. When he addresses the people as his life nears its end, he tells them to fear (hold in awe) the Lord and serve Him with all faithfulness. He specifically tells them to throw away all the gods their forefathers had worshiped in Egypt. He wants the people to make a choice: to renew their covenant with the one true God, or to admit that they will fail to give full loyalty to Him and will put other gods before Him.

The people have to decide if they will follow the Lord, who had proved His trustworthiness to them, or if they will run after other gods, which were just man-made idols. We have a natural tendency to want to control our own lives rather than being dependent on someone else, even when that someone is God—maybe especially if that someone is God. So it was with these Israelites, and they had shown a tendency to stray to gods of their own choosing. Knowing this tendency, Joshua wants to pin them down. He makes it clear that they had a choice; he is not forcing them into the decision he wants them to make.

Joshua does give them an example to follow: his own. "But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (v.15b). Talk is cheap. It is easy to talk the talk, not so easy to walk the walk. But Joshua has done so. His life was a model of following the Lord. The Israelites followed God during Joshua's lifetime...a tribute to Joshua's faith in God and his forthright leadership of the people.

The covenant Joshua wanted the people to renew with God was that they would obey Him and worship Him alone. The purpose was that they become a holy nation that could influence the rest of the world for God. The conquest of Canaan was a key step toward accomplishing that purpose. God wants us Christians to "conquer Canaan" (bring the world to Him) in our own day, but to do so spiritually through our love and care for others. We can do that if we put no other gods before Him.

R&D *What would “conquering Canaan” be like for Christians today? What steps might be involved?*

Prayer: *Lord God, why would we look to any god but You? You are our All in All. Keep us focused on Your love and shield us from the temptation to follow other gods.*

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### Lesson 3

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**Read: Exodus 32:1-10**

#### Idols

The Second Commandment is: “You shall not make for yourself an idol...” (Exodus 20:4). A first step in following other gods is to make idols of those gods. It is, again, a failure to honor the one true God. God is not visible. Idols are. Rather than trusting the unseen God, the Lord knew there would be a tendency to create physical representations of the unseen. These would not only be poor substitutes for the real God, but they would become the objects of worship themselves and lead people away from God.

In our reading for today we have a classic illustration of this phenomenon. Moses had been away from camp to be in the presence of the Lord, and the people wasted no time in seeking a substitute, something they could see and worship. Aaron, displaying a total lack of leadership responsibility despite the fact that Moses had left him in charge, immediately caved in to the desires of the people. A golden calf was fashioned from the materials given Aaron by the Israelites, and they began to worship it. God was so angry that, except for an impassioned plea by Moses, He would have destroyed them.

Although the Israelites had experienced the invisible God in action as they escaped from Egypt and were led by a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire, had been provided manna to eat, given water from the rock, and cared for in so many other ways, they nonetheless wanted physical gods they could see and shape to their own image. The desire to control their own destiny rather than being totally dependent on God was at the heart of their waywardness. By having “gods” made with their own hands, they would be free to worship them or to ignore them, depending on their own selfish desires.

Lest we be too condemning of the Israelites, we need to examine our own wayward tendencies. How often do we rationalize concerning things we want to do, but that we know would not be pleasing to God? What about our tendency to surround ourselves with so much *to do* that we don’t have time to find out how God might guide our decisions? More specifically, there are many idols, any one of which can become our primary focus: a comfortable lifestyle, wealth, a home that’s a showplace, prestige, possessions, reputation, and power. These are just a few of the examples of idols that would be in direct violation of the Second Commandment.

R&D *What idols might I be guilty of creating or worshipping?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to stay focused on You and not on my selfish desires. Bring my heart in line with Yours.*

## Lesson 4

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**Read: Judges 6: [1-24] 25-32**

### No Idols

Although Gideon is a somewhat reluctant hero, once he yields himself to God, he becomes a destroyer of idols. After God called Gideon to lead the Israelites, He immediately asked him to tear down the altar of the pagan god Baal. This would put Gideon's faith and commitment to the test. God would have no idols.

The problem for Gideon was that the Canaanite religion was political in nature. Therefore, the destruction of an idol was like an attack on the local government responsible for the idol. As a result, Gideon could face repercussions from his action. To the local authorities, he would be considered guilty of a crime and subject to punishment. Thus, he performed the deed at night to avoid detection.

Gideon was at great personal risk to himself for obeying God's law concerning idols. The townspeople wanted to kill him when they learned what he had done. Many of those who wanted to kill him were fellow Israelites...showing how far they had strayed from their faith in the one true God. God had said that idolaters were to be stoned (Deuteronomy 13:6-11), but these Israelites wanted to stone the destroyer of idols instead! Thanks to Joash, the people were brought to their senses about the situation, and Gideon went on to be one of the greatest heroes of the faith in the Old Testament.

If we are serious about our faith in Jesus Christ, there will be idols for us to destroy as well. This can occur when we stand up against an immoral business practice where we work or confront a friend who has become an alcoholic. When we do so, it will be dangerous for us. We may lose our job or a friendship. Sometimes the very ones who oppose our action are those who say they, too, are Christians. Nonetheless, we must do what God calls us to do regardless of the consequences. In the long run, we will be vindicated by God just as Gideon was.

*R&D What idols has God called you to destroy? How faithful were you in doing so?*

*Prayer: Blessed Lord, thank You for the model You have given us in Gideon. Help us to be steadfast in standing against idols in our day.*

## Lesson 5

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**Read: Acts 12:19b-23**

### Misusing God's Name

The Third Commandment is: "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God..." (Exodus 20:7). There are many ways this commandment can be violated. In our day we tend to think of using God's name in cursing as a typical example. However, in our reading for today, we see an example of one Jewish leader who should have known better who allowed others to worship him as God.

The Jews considered Jerusalem their capital, but the Roman conquerors of Palestine had chosen Caesarea as their headquarters. King Herod Agrippa I, a pawn of the Romans, therefore lived in Caesarea. The coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon were self-governing but were economically dependent on the Jews. Some dispute had arisen between these cities and Herod, and they were anxious to get the matter resolved. Thus, when he came before them resplendent in his attire, they received him as a god, and he reveled in this adulation rather than proclaiming the name of the true God.

Pride is what killed Herod. Pride is the ultimate sin. It is worse than apathy or complacency toward God or looking for a substitute for Him; it is the complete anti-God state of mind. Because Herod took unto himself the name of God, he suffered a terrible death.

We owe God total respect. We violate the Third Commandment when we fail to show that kind of respect. An example, of course, can be cursing by way of His (or Jesus') name. But there are many other ways we can do it: lukewarmness of faith, irregularity of worship, not exercising our spiritual gifts to God's glory, failing to witness to His love and blaming God when things aren't going our way. All of these and many others are misuses of God's name. Few of us would ever reach the point Herod did in accepting unto ourselves adulation due only to God, but there are many ways in which we can show disrespect for God's name.

*R&D What are some ways, other than those mentioned above, that we might be guilty of misusing God's name?*

*Prayer: Lord, call me to account when I am not showing proper respect for Your name. You are entitled to nothing less than my full devotion and respect.*

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## Lesson 6

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**Read: Psalm 29**

### **Honoring God's Name**

Herod Agrippa was a king, but a terrible example of one. Today's reading is a Psalm attributed to another king: David. He became the model king of the Israelites and was a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22). David gives us an example of how to honor God's name. David speaks of the glory of God's name: "Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness" (v.2). There could be no better use of God's name than the manner in which David expresses it here.

God's name is honored throughout Scripture. In the early stages of development of the Hebrew faith, God was held in such awe that His name was not even spoken. The two primary and personal names for God in the Hebrew Scriptures are *Elohim* and *Jehovah* (or *Yahweh*). The former name is representative of the fullness of divine power, the latter meaning "He who is," thus asserting divine self-existence.

God's character is revealed by His names throughout the Bible. He is Lord God and Master (Genesis 15:2), the Lord God of Truth (Psalm 31:5), Maker and Controller of the Universe (Amos 5:8), Lord of all the earth (Joshua 3:11-13), Lord of hosts (1 Samuel 1:3, 11), Hearer of prayers and Keeper of His word (Daniel 9:3, 4), our Rock (Foundation) (Deuteronomy 32:4), the Holy One and Shepherd of Israel (Isaiah 1:4, Psalm 80:1), and Our Father (Matthew 6:9), just to mention a few of God's names. Is it any wonder why misuse of His name is so ungodly?

We can honor God's name by living in obedience to His commandments, by being regular in worship, by showing love and concern to others (those He has created), by spending time with Him in prayer, in the conscientious study of His word written, by looking to Him for guidance and direction in our lives, and by helping to bring others into a saving relationship with Him through our Lord Jesus Christ.

*R&D Which name of God is most meaningful to you? Why?*

*Prayer: "Let them praise your great and awesome name Xhe is holy" (Psalm 99:3).*

## Lesson 7

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**Read: Numbers 15:32-36**

### Unholy Sabbaths

The Fourth Commandment is: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Exodus 20:8). God set aside the Sabbath for worship and rest. God knew that people would need to have unhurried time for worship and rest each week. This was to be a time of revering our God and refreshing our bodies, souls, and spirits. It has the dual character of honoring God and taking care of ourselves.

Many would admit that we don’t take the Sabbath (our Sunday) very seriously nowadays. When God was trying to establish the Israelites as His Chosen People who were to be His light to the world, it was essential that His Law be obeyed in every particular. Therefore, it is not as shocking as we might think that God would have a man stoned to death who had gathered wood on the Sabbath.

The man’s act was in direct disobedience to God. It was a sin against God; but it was also an act against himself because he was ignoring the provision for rest that God had made for him. Furthermore, it may well have been a sin against his fellow Israelites because, in gathering the wood, he may have been trying to get ahead of others.

Although, as we will see in our next study, Jesus shed new light on the Fourth Commandment, there is good reason for us to examine ourselves against God’s standard. My guess is that this is the commandment (of the Ten) that is most violated or ignored by Christians today. We fail to keep the Sabbath holy when we do not provide a day of rest each week for ourselves, our family, and those whom we employ; when we engage in activities that detract from the sacredness of the Sabbath; when we fail to prepare for and participate fully in worship services; when we fail to develop a sense of holiness in our lives; and when we fail to invite others to church.

*R&D What do you need to do to more properly observe the Sabbath?*

*Prayer: You are the Lord of the Sabbath, O God; help me to observe it in reverence and rest.*

## Lesson 8

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**Read: Matthew 12:9-14**

### Keeping the Sabbath

Jesus, in this passage, helps us to get the Fourth Commandment into perspective. Since the age when our last study took place, the Pharisees had created a set of rules and regulations concerning the Sabbath that went well beyond what God intended. For future generations of Christians, there needed to be greater understanding of what God’s basic intent was and a revelation of the distortions men had made of His commandment.

Jesus gives us that understanding and clarification, although he places his life in jeopardy in doing so. The Pharisees were putting him to the test so that they would have an excuse for plotting his death.

The Pharisees placed their rules above human need. Their Sabbath rules allowed healing on the Sabbath only in those situations in which the life of a person was in danger. Jesus healed on the Sabbath several times, but never when there was a life-threatening situation. He exposed the pettiness of the Pharisees’ rules. The best time to reach a person in need is when that need is apparent. Jesus might not have had an opportunity to bring God’s healing love to the man with the

withered arm at a later time because the two might never be in one another's presence again. Jesus looks to the spirit of God's law, which is to show love and concern to those in need regardless of the day of the week.

As Jesus, through his life and teachings, brought God's Law to fulfillment, he gave us the opportunity to look at the totality of the situation rather than being tripped up by dogma. There is freedom in this approach, but there is also danger. We humans, including Christians, have a tendency to rationalize. We can take a situation such as our passage for today in which Jesus healed on the Sabbath and decide that, therefore, it is all right for us to do anything we want to do on the Sabbath. That is the danger the Fourth Commandment would expect us to avoid. In addition to spending time worshiping God on the Sabbath, it is, of course, perfectly acceptable for us also to provide for ourselves a time of rest. Are these dual purposes how we actually spend each Sabbath?

*R&D What is your guideline for deciding what is appropriate activity on the Sabbath and what is not?*

*Prayer: Lord, You made the Sabbath for us that we might have the time to worship You and to rest from our work. Help me to stay focused on these two purposes to the exclusion of others.*

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## Lesson 9

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**Read: 2 Samuel 15:1-12**

### **Dishonoring A Parent**

“Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land...” (Exodus 20:12) is the Fifth Commandment. This is the only commandment that has a promise attached to it. It is also the “swing” commandment in that it is the first of the ten that has to do with our relationships with others rather than with God Himself. However, it also has to do with honor, which is what God has been commanding be given to Him. Thus, it should be obvious to us how important this commandment is.

Our reading for today, Absalom's conspiracy, is a classic example of a person dishonoring his father. Rather than being grateful for the privileged position in which he lived as son of the king, Absalom wanted the power and authority of kingship for himself. He began to usurp the people's loyalty to his father David by currying favor with them. Standing at the approach to the city gate, he would greet the people and make promises to them while, at the same time, degrading his father. Absalom's political strategy was to attain the support of the people by his good looks, apparent concern for their well being, and warm embraces. Many were fooled by this strategy and switched their allegiance to Absalom.

As he began to win the people over in this manner, he plotted the overthrow of his father's rule. This resulted in David's fleeing Jerusalem for a time, during which Absalom showed further disrespect for his father. Ultimately, however, it all led to Absalom's hideous death (2 Samuel 18).

We might look at our reading for today and be confident that we would never dishonor our parents in any way that would approach what Absalom did. However, it should motivate us to consider any way in which we have fallen short of the Fifth Commandment in our relationship with our parents. Do we seek their advice and counsel on important issues so that they know that we value their wisdom? Are we concerned about their needs, or are we only focused on ourselves and our children? Are we teaching our children to respect their grandparents? Do we pray for our parents daily? When we fall short of these possibilities, we are not honoring our parents to the extent we should.

R&D *Is there something I need to confess to my parents and seek their forgiveness? Will I?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for my parents. Help me to be a good parent to my children.*

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### Lesson 10

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**Read: Genesis 46:26-30**

#### **Honoring a Parent**

In our brief reading for today, we see a biblical example of a person who honored his father. Joseph had been his father's favorite son, and that had almost led to his death because of the jealousy of the brothers toward Joseph. But, by the time of our passage for today, Joseph had overcome many obstacles to become the second most powerful person in Egypt. He could now provide for his family (66 people!) in their time of need (famine in Israel). His utmost concern was for his dearly beloved father.

In this touching scene, Joseph rides out to meet his father, throws his arms around him, and weeps unashamedly. Jacob (also known as *Israel*) is so overjoyed by the reunion that he tells his son, "Now I am ready to die, since I have seen for myself that you are still alive." An old man has received the gift of his son whom he thought had died so many years before. Joseph further honored his father by taking his body back to Canaan for burial because Jacob wanted to be buried with his grandparents (Abraham and Sarah) and his parents (Isaac and Rebekah) rather than being laid to rest in Egypt.

We, too, would certainly want to honor our parents by providing for their last requests as Joseph did for Jacob. However, there are many other ways we can honor them long before they are at death's door. Most of all, we need to be sure that they know that we love them and are grateful for all they have done for us. If there has been contention in the family circle, we need to do all we can to seek forgiveness and reconciliation. We should recognize our parents on special occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries, and we should stay in touch with them regularly even if we live far apart.

Remember the second part of the Fifth Commandment, the promise we are given by God if we honor our parents? "We will live long in the land" (Exodus 20:12b). The love we show to our parents becomes a model for our children and how they will respect us. By being a blessing, we can be blessed.

R&D *What do I need to do today to honor my parents?*

Prayer: *Lord, we live in uncertain times, when marriage and family values are under attack. May we model, in our household, Your values to those around us.*

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### Lesson 11

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**Read: 1 Samuel 18:1-11 (19:1-24)**

#### **Murder**

The Sixth Commandment is, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). King Saul, the first king of Israel, sought to murder David out of sheer jealousy. David had slain Goliath when Saul and his army were either afraid to do so or inept at tackling the problem. David had formed a strong bond of friendship with Saul's son Jonathan. Then David had won the hearts of the people as an



even greater warrior than Saul. The reason for the jealousy is therefore obvious, but that it would lead to a desire to kill David emphasizes the weakness of character that is evident in Saul.

Today's reading is a lesson in the danger of jealousy. It begins with a person resenting another for who that person is or what he has: popularity, good looks, wealth, style, position, power, or whatever. That, in turn, can lead to our wishing the person didn't exist...at least in our realm of life. Carried further, jealousy can cause us to consider how he might be removed from the place in our life that impinges upon our happiness. We might wish that he be fired from his job, moved out of town, or suffer an illness, injury, or personal loss. Carried to the extreme, we could wish him dead. This, as Jesus has taught us, is almost as bad as performing the deed ourselves (see Matthew 5:22).

In Saul's case, jealousy led to anger, and anger can be a major cause of murder. Saul repeatedly sought David's death.

What about us? Surely, we would never be guilty of murder. Here, for our self-examination, are some attitudes and actions that might reflect a murderous inclination nonetheless: thinking evil thoughts toward others; allowing our anger to get out of control or to be a common response to our not getting our way; murdering others with our tongue, such as through sarcastic remarks; engaging in acts of violence or not adequately discouraging others (especially our children) from violent acts; creating disharmony or not bringing reconciliation in situations in which God could use us to do so; and failing to voice our concerns about the murderous activities of others.

*R&D What attitudes or actions on my part would the Sixth Commandment condemn?*

*Prayer: Lord, help me to be a peacemaker and reconciler rather than one who creates disharmony and strife.*

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## Lesson 12

**Read: 1 Samuel 24:1-7**

### No Murder

Interestingly, it is David (the intended victim in our last study) who becomes our model for not engaging in murder in today's lesson. We already know that Saul had tried to kill David and, in our reading for today, is hunting him down to destroy him. In the process of doing so, Saul went into a cave to relieve himself where he was totally vulnerable and at David's mercy. If David had killed him, he could certainly have rationalized that it was self-defense; and, if based on legal procedures in our day, he had been brought before a court of law to defend himself, that plea might well have succeeded.

David's men even attribute a quotation from God (v.4) as justification for David's disposal of Saul. However, Scripture never records that God had made such a statement to David or his men. The men may have interpreted David's anointing by Samuel (16:13) or Jonathan's prediction that David would become king (23:17) as justification for God's placing Saul in David's hands to resolve the issue. David, however, seems to be ashamed of himself for cutting off a piece of Saul's garment and chastises his men for indicating that he should have done more.

David was not jealous of Saul, and he believed God that, in due time, he would be king of Israel. Furthermore, he showed respect for the office of king because of the anointing of God upon the one holding that position. David allowed his faithfulness to God to overshadow any resentment he might have had against Saul for trying to kill him, or fear that Saul might ultimately succeed in doing so.

If our faith is in God, we can also let that overshadow any jealousy, fear, or murderous thoughts we might otherwise have. God's love can give us the patience to reflect on what is going on in another person's life that causes him or her to awaken hostility in us, and to be forgiving of it. God's love can help us see what He has given us and why; therefore, there is no need to be jealous of what others have. God's love can give us confidence that He is watching over us and that we have nothing to fear.

*R&D How are the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22, 23) growing in you today?*

*Prayer: Protect me, Lord, from saying unkind things to or about other people; help me to bless rather than condemn.*

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### Lesson 13

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**Read: 2 Samuel 11:1-5**

#### Adultery

"You shall not commit adultery" is the Seventh Commandment. In prior studies in this series, we have seen the good side of David. But, as was mentioned in the introduction to this series, the characters whose lives we are considering are, after all, human beings. They had their bad sides as well as their good. Today's reading shows us David at his worst.

Adultery is the sin; but behind the physical act is usually much more than sheer lust. Such was undoubtedly true in David's case. First of all, there was dereliction of duty. Instead of going into the field with his troops, he availed himself of the prerogatives of power and simply stayed home. Then he became bored and sought distraction. That, in turn, led to his seeing Bathsheba bathing and brought lust to his heart. The next steps were adultery and then murder to cover up his sin and acquire the woman as his wife. A recent President of the United States, when found to have committed adultery, simply explained his sin by saying, in effect, "I did it because I could." In other words, the power of the position carries with it all sorts of possibilities not available to the rest of us. Such was the case with David.

God will forgive us our sins if we truly seek forgiveness (as David did), but He will not relieve us of the consequences of what we have done. David's adulterous relationship with Bathsheba resulted in the death of the child they had conceived through the act, the rebellion of his son Absalom, and the division of the kingdom. The prophet Nathan confronted David concerning his sin (2 Samuel 12) and David revealed a penitent heart in composing Psalm 51. He had, nonetheless, allowed the seduction of power to lead him into heinous sin and suffered the consequences.

We must guide our hearts and minds or we may find ourselves running afoul of the Seventh Commandment. As another U.S. President pointed out, "We can commit adultery in our hearts by lustful thoughts, looks and desires." We endanger ourselves when we expose ourselves to opportunities for lustful thoughts and actions. If our entertainment is centered in books, magazines, internet, movies, plays, and floor shows of a sensual nature, we are placing our hearts in jeopardy. Even innocent "flirting" with someone of the opposite sex is inappropriate for a married person. Sexuality is a powerful force. We need to guard our thoughts and our hearts against its improper use.

*R&D What area of my life might cause me to run afoul of at least the spirit of the Seventh Commandment?*

Prayer: *Guard my heart against impure thoughts and sexual temptations, Dear Lord.*

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## Lesson 14

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**Read: Genesis 39:1-12**

### Avoiding Adultery

Once again, Joseph is our good illustration in the Bible of how to obey the Seventh Commandment. He had been taken to Egypt by Midianite merchants who had bought him from his brothers, who were otherwise planning to kill him. In Egypt he was sold by the Midianites to Potiphar, one of the Pharaoh's officials. Joseph was put in charge of Potiphar's household when he proved himself successful in all that he did because the Lord was watching over him.

Joseph lived in Potiphar's house, and the man's wife became attracted to him. Potiphar's wife apparently tried to seduce Joseph on many occasions (v.10), but Joseph managed to avoid the attempts and stayed away from her to the maximum extent. One day when no one else was around, however, she managed to grab him by his cloak and plead with him to have sex with her. Joseph fled, leaving her holding his cloak.

The immediate outcome for Joseph was not good. Potiphar's wife accused Joseph of attacking her and had his cloak to support her case. Joseph went to jail as a result; but, because God's hand was on him, one thing led to another, and he ended up being the second most important person in Egypt. The key thing to note is that, in refusing the seduction, Joseph acknowledges that committing adultery with the woman would have been wrong, not only because of the loyalty he owed his employer, but it would also have been a sin against God (v.9). There was none of this malarkey about things being all right so long as they are between "consenting adults." Joseph knew sin when he saw it, and he wasn't giving in.

In our day, we should not only avoid breaking the Seventh Commandment ourselves, but, as Christians, we have a responsibility to do whatever we can to fracture the grip that sexual immorality seems to have on the American public generally. We need to be involved in the fight against pornography and other factors that degrade human life. We need to help other people (especially young people) understand their sexuality from a biblical perspective. We should avoid dirty jokes and stories that downgrade the sanctity of life. We should stand against anything that cheapens the value of life.

R&D *What are you doing to promote biblical sexual morality in your community, your church, the nation?*

Prayer: *Lord God, help us always to keep sexuality in a biblical perspective.*

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## Lesson 15

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**Read: Genesis 31:19-35**

### Stealing

"You shall not steal" is the Eighth Commandment. In our reading for today, we have the incident of Rachel stealing her father Laban's household idols. Jacob had earlier stolen his father's blessing (Genesis 27:1-29), which had put him at enmity with his brother Esau who, as the elder brother, was to have received the blessing. Jacob had escaped to Haran to live with his uncle Laban and ended up marrying two of Laban's daughters. The relationship with Laban had also been one of deception, so it is not surprising that "the plot thickens" as Jacob and his family sneak away from Laban, and Rachel steals something of her father's in the process.

Although the possession of idols was forbidden to the Israelites, they would have meant something else to Laban. Where he lived, people kept small wooden or metal idols (“gods”) that were thought to protect their homes and provide guidance when needed. However, they also had legal significance. They were passed on to the heir and thus were evidence of the heir’s property rights. This explains why they were so important to Laban, and why he went to such great lengths to find them.

Jacob is so sure that none of his family would have stolen the idols, he tells Laban that anyone who has done so should die. It is extremely fortunate for Rachel that she covered up her thievery so well; otherwise, there could have been disastrous consequences.

Basically, stealing is sheer selfishness. We tend to think of it in terms of wanting something someone else has and taking the steps to get it. Yet in our day we can steal by cheating on our income taxes or in seeking improper expense reimbursement at work. Some would contend that we break the Eighth Commandment with reckless over-consumption of food and other resources, not sharing our wealth with others, and not sharing the workload in our churches and communities in meeting the needs of others. As with the other commandments we are considering in this study, it is a matter of self-examination.

*R&D What practices am I engaging in that, in their broadest sense, might violate the Eighth Commandment?*

*Prayer: Lord, forgive me of my selfishness that may have robbed others of the time and attention they deserve.*

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## Lesson 16

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**Read: Acts 4:32-37**

### Generosity

The opposite of stealing is giving. Barnabas was a great giver! In the early days of the Christian Church the members didn't think of what they had as being their own. They shared freely, eliminating poverty among them. They refused to let a brother or sister in Christ suffer when someone else had plenty. The unity these people felt in the Holy Spirit was what motivated them to be free of materialism and open to the needs of others.

Barnabas was a leader in the early church. A Levite by birth, he was a member of the Jewish tribe that had responsibility to care for the Temple. However, his family moved to Cyprus, so he couldn't serve in the Temple. He became a Christian and a missionary companion of Paul. Not only was he generous with his property, as in our reading for today, but he was generous of spirit. He had introduced Paul to the Christians in Jerusalem when they were fearful of the former Saul, persecutor of Christians. He supported John Mark when Paul would have nothing more to do with the young man.

Barnabas was nicknamed “The Encourager,” and he showed his unselfish generosity in these several ways. He can be a model for us as we think about how we can show the spirit of the Eighth Commandment, not only by not stealing, but by giving instead.

Generosity of spirit is, of course, shown by giving at least 10% of our income for the work of the Lord. But we also do it by serving our community in various ways: giving blood regularly, being a “Meals on Wheels” driver, serving at the local homeless shelter, assisting Habitat for Humanity in various ways, being a Boy or Girl Scout leader, or helping with the Little League team. There are unlimited numbers of things that need to be done in our families, our churches, our

neighborhoods and beyond. They give us ample opportunities to obey the spirit of the Eighth Commandment.

*R&D What activity are you involved in, or does God want you to get involved in, to reflect generosity toward others?*

*Prayer: Lord, there is no way we can out give You; but we pray that Your love for others might be shown through us to meet those needs around us that You want us to meet.*

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## Lesson 17

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**Read: Exodus 32:19-24**

### **False Testimony**

The Ninth Commandment is: “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16). Today we re-visit the Golden Calf incident, though now we are looking specifically at Aaron's role in it. Moses had left Aaron in charge of the Israelites while he went to be with God on the mountain. Instead of showing leadership character when the people asked for an idol to worship, Aaron immediately capitulated to their desires, told them to bring him the needed gold, and fashioned it into the golden calf. He was as much a party to the incident as anyone and was more responsible for it than anyone else because he failed in this leadership role.

The issue we are considering in this study is the one of false testimony. When confronted by Moses about what had happened, Aaron blamed it on the people. He tells the story in such a way as to make himself sound like an innocent bystander who simply took the gold they had thrust upon him, threw it into the fire, and out came the calf! The “blame game” appears several times in Scripture, beginning with Adam blaming Eve for eating the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3:1-13) although he appears to have been standing beside her the whole time and took a bite himself. In today's reading, however, we also have false testimony in that Aaron accused the people of being wholly responsible for the calf when that simply was not the truth.

Not all of us are called to be leaders; but when we are we need, by the grace of God, to stand up to the test. The leader needs to stand on the word of God even if he or she must stand alone. Aaron falsely blamed the people, and he and they were almost destroyed as a result.

Lest we be too harsh on Aaron, we need to examine ourselves in respect to the Ninth Commandment. We have violated the spirit of this commandment any time we gossip about someone or encourage others to do so by willingly listening to their slander of another person. We are also guilty when we fail to defend someone wrongly accused or to bear a positive witness on behalf of our neighbor. We can even be guilty by unnecessarily thinking or speaking negatively about a person, even when true. God wants us to have a gracious attitude toward others, not a condemning one.

*R&D Wherein might I be running afoul of the Ninth Commandment? What do I need to do about it?*

*Prayer: Lord, help me to be at least as fair in judging others as I am in judging myself.*

## Lesson 18

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**Read: 1 Samuel 3:1-18**

### True Testimony

Even though he was only a child, Samuel gives us a positive biblical example of obedience to the Ninth Commandment. We are not to give false testimony against our neighbor. Likewise, we are to be truthful in our testimony regardless of the danger that imposes on us. Samuel did not flinch; he told Eli everything, “hiding nothing from him” (v.18).

“Eli’s sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the Lord” (2:12). They treated sacrificial offerings to the Lord with contempt and otherwise took selfish advantage of their position as priests. Eli had been warned by God about the sons but had not taken the necessary disciplinary action. Eli may have done a good job of overseeing worship in the Temple, but he had been apathetic in attending to his fatherly duties.

We can only speculate concerning why the message of doom in our reading for today was given to the child Samuel rather than directly to Eli. The Lord may have been testing the boy, or He may have believed the message would have a greater impact on Eli if it came through the child rather than directly to him. In any event, the message was a devastating one: “The guilt of Eli’s house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering” (v.14). Can you imagine, particularly as a young person totally dependent on the older person to whom the message is addressed, having to be as completely honest as Samuel was expected to be in this situation? Yet Samuel gave a true testimony regardless of the consequences.

How might we learn what God would teach us about the positive aspects of the Ninth Commandment? How can we do just the opposite of giving false testimony against our neighbor? We can begin by loving our neighbor as ourselves. That means getting to know our neighbor, reaching out to him or her in any appropriate way, and giving our neighbor the opportunity to reciprocate. And, in doing so, we need to remember not to let our “neighborhood” be too small; our love and concern needs to reach much farther than the community in which we live.

*R&D What positive thing do I need to do for my neighbor?*

*Prayer: Lord, please use me to reach my neighbors for You.*

## Lesson 19

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**Read: 1 Kings 21:1-16**

### Covetousness

The Tenth Commandment is: “You shall not covet...” (Exodus 20:17). In considering it, we will look at a pair who were the classic “king and queen of mean.” Ahab, the eighth king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, was regarded as its most evil monarch. His wife, Jezebel, was a pagan who systematically tried to eliminate the faithful in Israel. She even tried to have God’s prophet Elijah killed. With her husband’s permission, she funded and supported Baal worship. Ahab and Jezebel were accustomed to getting their own way, whatever their desires might be, and they were prepared to eliminate any obstacles that stood in their way.

In our reading for today, the issue was covetousness. Ahab wanted Naboth’s vineyard. The land, however, had passed to Naboth as a part of his inheritance. It was considered a duty to keep ancestral land in the family, and Naboth wanted to uphold God’s laws. He was not being selfish in refusing Ahab; he was simply trying to do the right thing.

When Ahab began to pout about not getting what he wanted, Jezebel took over. She was a plotter, and probably thoroughly enjoyed creating the intrigue that led to Naboth's death and the transfer of the land to Ahab. These people not only coveted their neighbor's land, but they also let nothing stand in the way of getting what they wanted. They may have succeeded in their evil schemes for a while, but both suffered violent deaths (1 Kings 22:29-38 and 2 Kings 9:30-37).

In the materialistic world in which we live, covetousness can be a great danger. Advertisements continually tell us what we are entitled to or make us envious of those who have what we don't. We are violating the Tenth Commandment when we envy others for what they have, try to "keep us with the Joneses," are inordinately discontent or ungrateful concerning what we have, seek personal gain at the expense of others, seek goals that are not in accordance with God's will for our lives, or make value judgments irrespective of faith guidance. Once again, some self-examination would seem to be in order to ensure that we are not violating the Tenth Commandment.

*R&D Wherein may the influences around me be causing me to fall into the trap of covetousness?*

*Prayer: Lord, help me to remember that we do not enter the kingdom of God by going after all the things we can get, but by being content with what God wants us to have.*

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## Lesson 20

**Read: Genesis 13:1-12**

### Not Coveting

In today's reading, Abram gives us a wonderful example of doing just the opposite of coveting. Abram had prospered in the land, and so had his nephew Lot. Each had livestock in abundance, and the herdsmen of Abram and those of Lot began to quarrel. It was undoubtedly difficult to insure that the flocks of each owner got their equal share of food and water, so it was time to part company.

Abram, being the patriarch of the clan, certainly would have been entitled to his choice of the land they were going to divide between them. However, he exhibited an exceptionally generous character by giving Lot first choice. He told Lot, "If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left" (v.9). Lot chose the more promising of the land that lay before them, and Abram seemed content to accept that decision and live on the remaining land.

Lot chose good pasture and available water. From a purely selfish point of view, he had made the better choice. However, life is full of surprises, and sometimes the selfish choice can lead to trouble instead of to good. Lot ended up living in the area of Sodom, "sin city" of its day due to sexual immorality. Abram would have to rescue him from disaster on two occasions in the days ahead. Abram apparently never coveted the seemingly better land Lot had chosen, and he continued to feel responsible for his nephew and his nephew's family rather than feeling resentment. In this passage, Abram is an example for us of the completely non-coveting person.

What, then, should be our attitude toward affirmatively obeying the Tenth Commandment? Rather than coveting what other people have, we should rejoice with them in their good fortune. We should be content with and be good stewards over those things that God has given us so that there is no temptation to want what is not ours. We should be sensitive to decisions we face that could negatively affect others (i.e., cause them to covet). We should seek clear guidance from the Lord before taking steps or making purchases that seem above our financial ability to handle. Such an attitude blesses the Lord.

R&D *What do I have that I could give to someone in greater need?*

Prayer: *Lord, forgive me for wanting things other people have. Help me always to see the many ways You have blessed me.*

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## Lesson 21

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**Read: Matthew 26:14-16, 47-50**

### Not Loving God

“Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment” (Matthew 22:37,38). Having looked at the Ten Commandments on the issue of obeying God, it is now time to look at the first of two commandments that came from Jesus himself. They were, of course, based on God's Law. The one we look at today is from Deuteronomy 6:5.

Our example of a person not loving God is Judas Iscariot. How could one of the twelve people closest to Jesus, someone who had to have known that Jesus was a reflection of a loving God, end up betraying him? One answer would be that Judas was simply seduced by Satan (Luke 22:3,4). The more specific explanation put forth by scholars is that his motivation was either power or greed. Judas was the treasurer of the disciples (see John 12:6). He perhaps assumed that he would be given an important position in the government once Jesus overthrew Roman rule. When Jesus was anointed with expensive oil in the episode immediately preceding our reading for today (vv. 6-13), it was obvious that there would be no earthly kingdom for Jesus. Judas’ desire for power and wealth would not be realized if he continued following Jesus. Thus, he decided to betray Jesus for money and favor with the Jewish authorities.

Ultimately, Judas was able to see the evil in his actions, but he failed to seek forgiveness. In the end, he hanged himself.

There is a sense in which we show that we do not love God as we should, that we ourselves betray Jesus, every time we sin. God has reason to believe that, if we profess our love for Him, we will show it by obeying Him (see 1 Samuel 15:22). We have a conscience as a sort of inner warning system to alert us to what is right and what is wrong. Our conscience becomes increasingly attuned to God’s will as we grow in our knowledge of Scripture and in the fellowship of Christ’s church. Although we certainly show our love of God by our praise and worship, we most significantly do it by obeying Him rather than sinning against Him and failing to do His will.

R&D *How do you demonstrate that you love God with all your heart, soul and mind?*

Prayer: *Lord, I am not as obedient to You as I should be. Please forgive me and build in me a better heart, soul, and mind.*

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## Lesson 22

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**Read: Luke 1:26-38**

### Loving God

Perhaps no one other than Jesus himself has shown the love of God equal to that of Mary. As we reflect on the glory of Christmas Day, it is an especially important time to look at what her love of God has meant to all the rest of us down through the years.

To the people of Mary’s day, she would have seemed unimportant to God. She was young, poor, and a female living in a strongly male-dominated society. Yet God chose her for one of the



most important acts of obedience in the history of the world. From Mary's point of view, the message delivered to her by Gabriel was a mixed blessing at best. True, she had been chosen to give birth to the Messiah; but, as an unmarried girl, she would be subjected to ridicule and worse. Think what hinged on Mary's "Yes"!

Disaster seemed to face Mary. Unless the father of a child agreed to marry a pregnant woman, she would probably remain unmarried for life. If her own father rejected her, she could be forced into begging or even prostitution in order to survive. Furthermore, Mary's story that her pregnancy was the result of the action of God, the Holy Spirit, would have been a sign of insanity. Against all of these practical reasons for her to suggest to Gabriel that someone else would be a better choice, Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

Because Mary loved God enough to yield obediently to His will, a child was born who changed the world. You and I are able to live with God eternally because of Mary's obedience. How small that makes the tasks God asks us to do! In a sense, the call upon Mary is God's call upon us today, to "birth" Jesus into a world desperately in need of his saving grace in whatever way God would use us to do that.

*R&D What task does God have for me today?*

*Prayer: Thank You, God, for Mary.*

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## Lesson 23

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**Read: Acts 5:1-11**

### **Not Loving Your Neighbor**

"And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:39). This is the second part of the two commandments Jesus called the "greatest." Again, the commandment we look at today was not new with Jesus, but was based on Leviticus 19:18, listed among a series of Laws God spoke to Moses, including some that parallel the Ten Commandments and some that go further.

Two people who failed to show love for their neighbors at a critical time in the days of the early church are our subjects for today: Ananias and Sapphira. Their problem was that they had professed to doing one thing (selling their property and saying that they were giving all the proceeds to the apostles) while they had actually done another (held back some of it for themselves). We saw how God reacted in the early days of the Hebrew faith when someone failed to obey the letter of the Law: the Israelite who worked on the Sabbath (Numbers 15:32-36). A similar thing was in operation here. In the formative days of the Christian church, absolute honesty was expected, and Ananias and Sapphira suffered the consequences of their selfishness and the deceit with which they tried to hide it.

If this pair had truly loved their neighbors as themselves, they would not have held back money designed to meet the needs of their brothers and sisters in the faith. The movement of the Holy Spirit in the life of the early church was almost tangible. Yet, even in this situation, it was possible to be seduced by Satan (v.3), and that is what Peter accused them of.

Unfortunately for us, the power of the Holy Spirit is not as obvious in the age in which we live. But, fortunately for us, as a result, God does not seem to judge us as harshly as He did Ananias and Sapphira. Nonetheless, we do need to examine ourselves to see wherein we may not be showing the love to others that God has every reason to expect of us. Do we know our neighbors and what their needs are? Do we pray for them regularly? If they are unchurched, have we invited them

to worship with us, and have we told them what Christ means to us? Do we take steps to meet their other needs?

R&D *What might God be prompting me to do for my neighbor right now?*

Prayer: *Lord, make us ever mindful of the needs of others, and willing to do our part to meet those needs.*

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## Lesson 24

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**Read: Luke 10:25-37**

### Loving Neighbor

Although our reading for today is one of Jesus' parables rather than a story of a real person, it illustrates the point so well that it had to be used. When the expert in the Law wanted to know how to attain eternal life, and Jesus asked him what was written in the Law, the expert responded with the two "greatest commandments" we have been considering over the final days of this study. Jesus acknowledges that he has answered well. But, if he is to love his neighbor as himself, the man asks, "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus then gives us the parable. Because he knew that his questioner was simply trying to justify himself, Jesus intentionally used a Samaritan (scorned by orthodox Jews of the time) as the hero and a priest and a Levite as the villains. There are at least three lessons to be learned from this parable: (1) our neighbor is anyone in need, regardless of race, nationality, or cultural background; (2) it is easy to rationalize ourselves into failing to show the love that will meet that need because of some selfish priority we set for ourselves; and (3) love means setting aside such erroneous thinking, and doing what needs to be done.

As our Advent study, we have been considering the importance of obeying God, and we have seen both good and bad examples of doing that. We have been asked to examine ourselves against these models to see wherein God may be calling us to be more obedient and to seek His forgiveness in our failures to do so.

So much depends on our attitude. Let's end this study by looking at a collection of attitudes concerning our reading for today, taken from the *Life Application Bible*. To the expert in the Law, the wounded man was a subject to discuss. To the robbers, he was someone to use and exploit. To the religious men, he was a problem to be avoided. To the innkeeper, he was a customer to serve for a fee. To the Samaritan, he was a human being worth being cared for and loved. To Jesus, all of them and all of us were worth dying for.

R&D *What have you learned about obeying God from this study?*

Prayer: *Lord, help us in the days ahead to love You more truly by obeying You more fully.*

*by Harry C. Griffith*

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