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It's interesting what you can find on the internet, and recently I read a question someone posted in an online forum: "Which of the Ten Commandments is more difficult to follow?" One person replied,

I think the [beginning] sets up all the rest. "You shall have no other gods before me." Placing God first is the greatest struggle. So many ideas, people, issues, pursuits, etc. seem to seek to be number one in our lives. They become our focus, our gods.<sup>1</sup>

It's easy to get distracted from our focus on God, isn't it? We often think our issues and problems are the center of the universe, but when we focus on the bigger picture, sometimes our issues become a bit less traumatic. The first several commandments help us look beyond ourselves by refocusing our lives toward the bigger picture—toward God.

Last week we examined the beginning commandments: worship only one God, don't create idols, avoid using God's name in disrespectful ways, and honor the Sabbath with worship and restfulness. The commandment to honor the Sabbath serves as a bridge between the

commandments about God and the ones about us, for it includes honoring God and caring for ourselves with rest.

While some may find these first set of instructions challenging to follow, I sometimes wonder if the next set of commandments are even more difficult—the ones telling us how to get along with one another. I imagine if I surveyed a random group of people on whether they have more conflicts with God or more conflicts with other people, we'd discover that most of our conflicts happen with one another.

When God's people escaped from the Pharaoh and no longer had guards watching over them to keep them in line, the conflicts likely increased between the people, leading to the next set of commandments.

Let's begin where we left off last Sunday—the fifth commandment. Following this one could help prepare us for next Sunday: Father's Day. "Honor your father and mother." The Hebrew word כָּבֵד (kav·bad) can mean to honor or glorify someone, but interestingly the word can also mean "to be

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heavy or weighty.” We might phrase this commandment as: *To honor one’s parents is a heavy responsibility, so don’t take it lightly. Doing so will make your life longer.* I think that makes sense, doesn’t it, for dynamics can affect our life and health.

We know honoring parents is not always an easy thing to do, for as we grow older we discover that our parents are human just like everyone else. Parents may fail, make mistakes, fall prey to alcoholism or other addictions, yell at or abuse their children, and so honoring them may not be an easy thing to do. Parents may even pass on bad habits to their children, compounding the dysfunctional issues in families. Honoring them becomes a heavy task, one that’s almost unbearable to endure. Carrying around that pain may feel like a weight, which may help us understand how the Hebrew word for “honor” can also mean “weight.”

I think God provided this heavy commandment knowing that it would be challenging. It’s not always easy to forgive our parents or one another when things go awry, but I think God challenges us

to continue striving to honor them, just as God continues to love us even when we go astray.

We could spend an entire day talking about the importance of family, but let’s move on to the next commandment. Some Bibles translate this sixth one as “You shall not kill,” while other translations phrase it, “You shall not murder.” The Hebrew word can mean either one, as well as “You shall not slay.” Murder is often understood as the intentional, premeditated killing of another person with malice. One might kill someone out of self-defense, with some suggesting this is not the focus of this commandment.

Growing up in the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition, however, I learned this commandment meant to never kill anyone, to resist violence with peace rather than striking back. When it came time for me to sign up for the draft, I registered as a conscientious objector, meaning my religious faith prevented me from harming anyone, which meant I would not make a very good soldier.

Through the years, I’ve listened to those who have served in the military or police. In the face of violence and injustice, I have heard others explain

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how self-defense may involve killing another person, how it's different from murder. But regardless of how we define the word, when killing someone we take something that's not ours—another life. We don't own or control the essence of life, for that only comes from God, and when we take it from another person, we've stolen something that doesn't belong to us. We each have the right to proclaim, "Don't take my life—that's mine!

Many of us may not know how we would respond when facing a situation of taking a life, and I hope most of us never have to face the choice. For those who have faced life and death decisions, our prayers reach out to offer them comfort in the challenges they've faced.

The seventh commandment is also about taking something that doesn't belong to you: another person's spouse. When we enter a marriage covenant, we close the doors on other intimate relationships. It's not a vow that says, "I'll stay with you until something better comes along," or "I'll stay with you as long as I get my way." It's a promise that even in the difficulties of life, we

choose to work through the problems, the ups and downs. When someone takes another's spouse, one may feel like crying out, "That's mine," and although no one owns another person, in adultery it feels as though a spouse is being torn away. Once the bond is broken, it's very difficult to put the pieces together again.

The eighth commandment plainly states, "You shall not steal." That's a basic idea: If it's not yours, don't take it—something we teach our children from their earliest years, and children are quick to let everyone know what belong to them. Many times, I heard my children arguing over toys, with one loudly proclaiming to the other: That's mine!

A mother and her two small boys were having a serious discussion about stealing and why it was wrong. Mother asked the boys why they thought stealing was wrong. Five-year-old Luke said that stealing was against God's laws. He had learned about the Ten Commandments in Sunday school. Mother asked the boys if they knew any other of the Ten Commandments. Luke remembered two others: "You shall not murder," and "Honor your father and mother." But they could not think of any others. After some time of thinking, Patrick piped up, "I know one: 'Pick up your toys!'"<sup>2</sup>

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Although “clean up after yourself” is not one of the Ten Commandments, it certainly would make an excellent one to add to the list! Just imagine a world without trash alongside the road.

The ninth commandment tells us one more thing to not take from someone: the truth. Don’t give false witness or testimony against another person. Don’t lie about another person or accuse someone dishonestly. Be honest. Don’t steal the truth away from someone.

How many times have we tried to shift the blame onto someone else? “I didn’t do it; he did.” Sometimes we might even go along with the crowd, encouraging one another to tell lies, as was the case when

a minister noticed a group of boys standing around a small stray dog. “What are you doing, boys?”

“Telling lies,” said one of the boys. “The one who tells the biggest lie gets the dog.”

“Why, when I was your age,” the shocked minister said, “I never ever thought of telling a lie.”

The boys looked at one another, a little disappointed. Finally, one of them shrugged and said, “I guess he wins the dog.”<sup>3</sup>

We’ve all made mistakes, broken one or more of the commandments, but in the midst of our brokenness, God continues to offer us another chance. The commandments were not designed to obtain God’s favor but to serve as a gift to help us live better lives with one another and God. Strive to follow, but when you fail, trust that God continues to reach out and love you and offer you another chance.

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*Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 3226-3230). Zondervan. Kindle Edition. #535.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.quora.com/Which-of-10-commandments-is-more-difficult-to-follow](http://www.quora.com/Which-of-10-commandments-is-more-difficult-to-follow)

<sup>2</sup> Hodgins, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 4537-4542). Zondervan. Kindle Edition. #931.

<sup>3</sup> Hodgins, Michael. *1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for*