

Words of Life: 4. Guardrails
Exodus 20:13; Matthew 5:21-22
March 7, 2021
Pastor Steve Richards

Two weeks ago, one of the most recognizable names in sports became the breaking news story of the day when the car he was driving left a notoriously hazardous stretch of road. Tiger Woods was not the first to have an accident at this location. Because there was no guardrail, the car rolled over a couple of times, leaving Tiger Woods with a crushed leg and ankle. Fortunately, the internal guardrails of the vehicle he was driving – the seatbelt and the airbags – probably saved his life. It was another reminder of the value of guardrails. We are in the middle of a sermon series that exams the 10 Commandments as guardrails that God provides to keep us from danger – and when we look at those guardrails through the eyes of Jesus, we discover the words that lead to Life.

Today, I had hoped we would examine two commandments, but we will only have time commandment six: **Do not kill**. At first, it would seem there's not much to add. Do not kill seems to speak for itself, but there's more to this commandment than we realize.

If it were as easy as don't kill, why is it that there is so much of it? So much that we get immune to the news reports. Unless it touches our lives personally or someone we know, we hardly notice. When we turn to the sixth commandment, there is an immediate disconnect between teaching and practice. We find places in scripture where there is killing, even killing that appears sanctioned by God. But here the original Hebrew of this command is just two words: **lo tirtsach**, **literally "no murder"** There's an urgency to these words. To murder someone is to murder a person who was created in the image of God. It is as if we murder God. It's like this: if someone hurts one of my children, it's personal to me. Last week, my grandson fell and hit his head on the floor and began to cry and so did I. He got hurt and it hurt me. When a human is harmed, God takes it personally. Every person is a person of sacred worth.

So what is God saying with this commandment? These commandments were given for the purpose of providing a pathway toward a goal. God wants to establish a certain kind of community and this is one of the boundaries that will define your life within this community – no killing. And if that's the guardrail, then what does it mean to live within the guardrail – to travel God's pathway? If you listened to my message three weeks ago, that's the first verse of Exodus 20:2. **I am Yahweh who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery**. Yahweh valued life enough to bring the Israelites out of slavery. Yahweh has authority over all life. All life is God's life, and human life belongs to God and must be respected. We remain in the path not by avoiding the guardrail but embracing God's greatest hope for us – it's LIFE.

In the very beginning of the Bible, in the book of Genesis, chapter one we are given a picture of the perfect world. When the humans are created, God says, "Look, I have given you all of this. I have given you life." But almost immediately, there was willful disobedience. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and they are expelled from the Garden paradise. And by chapter four, we meet Cain and Abel. Life was going well for Abel, but not so well for Cain. One day, both Cain and Abel brought an offering to God, but Abel's offering was seen as more favorable than Cain's. As a result, Cain felt jealousy and resentment toward his brother until one day Cain kills his brother. In the same chapter, Lamech, the father of Noah, boasts, "I killed a man for wounding me, a boy for striking me." And since God did not punish Cain for killing his own brother, Lamech is certain that God will exact revenge 77 times for anyone who attempts to harm him. Maybe you've seen the bumper sticker: [slide] I don't get mad, I get even. Lamech's

said, "I don't get even, I get ahead." There is one act of violence after another until Genesis 6:11 **In God's sight, the earth had become corrupt and was filled with violence.** And God sends a flood to cleanse the earth of humanity and the ways they harm each other. Only Noah and his family are spared as a remnant so God can begin again. But as soon as the flood waters recede and the animals leave the ark, Noah thumbs his nose at God. And violence continues. And that's the world in which we live.

Our daughter lives in a neighborhood in the Twin Cities where it is not uncommon for her to hear gunshots during the night. In fact, one night the gunshots came from the house next door to hers and later she looked out the window to see a person carried out of the house in a body bag. That's not where most of us live, but it is reality in certain parts of the Twin Cities area. Maybe you noticed this editorial in last week's Star Tribune: **I live in a cemetery called north Minneapolis.** It was written by a young man in high school who fears for his life as he sees his neighborhood filled with trees decorated with the names of persons who have been killed by gun violence. God values life – your life – every life, but today we still live in a violent world and it's not enough for us to say, "God, I've not killed anybody."

What leads someone to kill another person? It's anger, jealousy, revenge, fear, insecurity, criminal acts, hate. All of these are matters of the heart. We may not have killed anyone, but we know these matters of the heart. When we turn to Jesus, that's what he wants us to see. In Matthew 5: **You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, don't commit murder, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment.** Jesus takes us beyond the letter of the law to examine the heart – your heart, my heart. **If they say to their brother or sister, 'You idiot,' they will be in danger of being condemned by the governing council, And if they say, 'You fool,' they will be in danger of fiery hell.** When we hold onto anger, it leads to trouble, and may lead you to say or do things you shouldn't. Even our words can violate the 6th Commandment. "You idiot" – the Hebrew word is RAKA which is a swear word. You fool – the Hebrew word is MORE from which we get the word moron. The words we use can harm their soul. I have this poster on the wall beside my desk at home **Sticks and stone can break my bones, but names will really hurt me.** Over the years, the poster has faded but it pictures a creature with a broken heart. The words we use can send us over the guardrail and leave us in even greater harm than the object of our anger.

Some days it doesn't take much to set us off – maybe we didn't hear the alarm or the traffic slows us down or we're forced to wait in line – or we don't get what we want when we want it and suddenly a few unwelcome comments that normally are harmless strike a blow deep inside and it feels like we've grown fangs and claws. I haven't been on a plane in the past year, but back when I was traveling by plane there was a time that I was in a hurry to get through the security line. I was running late. But when the security person looked at my driver's license, he said, "I can't let you by. Your driver's license is expired." I knew that wasn't true. He had looked at the number wrong, but suddenly from somewhere inside there was an immediate anger and I said, "What do you mean my license is expired." Fortunately, before I said anything else, he said, "I'm sorry, I just looked at it wrong. I think I need a break." And just as quickly as I felt the anger, I was suddenly ashamed.

This morning, before I left the house, I walked into the bathroom to brush my teeth and an amazing thing happened. I took the tube of toothpaste, squeezed it, and do you know what came out? Toothpaste! It wasn't mashed potatoes or jello or Ben Gay – just green, minty toothpaste. God knows when I put God first in my life, the first thing that will come out of my life even when I am under stress – even when I am attacked – will be God's love. If only Cain had

taken a good long walk and had taken time in prayer instead of venting his anger toward his brother, Abel, how different his life would have been. Instead, he spent the rest of his life as a marked man. And when God came to Cain, Cain pushed God away. The commandments are all about the heart, it's not enough to just stay away from the guardrail – choose LIFE.

In Adam Hamilton's book, *Words of Life*, he tells the story of Victoria Ruvolo. In 2004, she was driving her car on a highway near her home in Long Island, New York. There was another car on that highway, coming toward her that was filled with six teenagers. The six teenagers had stolen a credit card and gone shopping, buying all sorts of stupid things, including a 20-pound frozen turkey. What were they going to do with a frozen turkey? This car with six teenagers and the frozen turkey was coming from one direction and Victoria in her car from another direction. One of the teenagers named Ryan was sitting in the back seat and had this brilliant idea to throw the frozen turkey at another car and it broke through the windshield of Victoria's car, striking her face, breaking every bone in her face. She was in surgery for ten hours. It took 4 titanium plates and a wire mesh to hold her eyeball in place. She didn't wake up for over a month and was out of work for 9 months. At the end of that time, the district attorney said all the kids in the car testified Ryan did it and Ryan also admitted doing it. He recommended a 25-year prison sentence for this 19-year-old who threw the frozen turkey out the window. At the courtroom on the day of sentencing, what Victoria saw was a kid wearing a suit that looked much too big for him. He looked so frail, his head down. She said, "When I saw him, my heart went out to him. He looked like a lost soul." When the judge asked if she wanted to say anything, she said, "Please pardon him and let him have a second chance." That day he was sentenced – not to 25 years but 6 months in prison and 5 years of probation. When the sentencing was over, Ryan walked toward Victoria. The officers in the court rushed forward to hold him back but Victoria said, "as he walked over to me, I could see he was crying profusely, and he said, 'I never meant for this to happen to you. I prayed for you every day. I'm so glad you are doing well.'" Victoria took him in her arms and as she held him, she said, "Just do something good with your life. Take this experience and do something good with your life."

Victoria died recently, but the obituary described how she spent the rest of her life teaching about forgiveness, writing a book on forgiveness, and helping others find forgiveness. In an interview before she died, she said: "Everything we do in this world affects someone else." That's what God was saying in this 6th Commandment.

What Victoria learned is don't kill, don't try to get even, don't harm other people. Forgive others and love each person as the person God created them to be. God has a goal for your life, and to remain on that path, pay attention to your heart.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of March 7, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Merciful God, you have commanded us to be holy, yet holiness often eludes us. You have commanded us to love, yet we often hurt the very people we claim to love the most. Grant us your grace and mercy which are greater than our failings. We confess our deep need for you that we might love as you love. Amen.

Monday, March 8

Scripture: Exodus 20:13; Numbers 35:16-21

Do not kill.

But if someone strikes a person with an iron object and he dies, he is a murderer. The murderer must definitely be put to death. If someone strikes another with a stone in hand that could cause death and he dies, he is a murderer. The murderer must definitely be put to death. Or if someone strikes with a wood object in hand that could cause death, he is a murderer. The murderer must definitely be put to death. The close relative responsible for the blood of the dead is the one who will put the murderer to death. When he meets him, he will execute him. If in hatred someone hits another or throws something at him with premeditation, he will be put to death. Or if in hostility someone strikes another with his hand and he dies, the one who struck is a murderer and he will be put to death. The close relative will put the murderer to death when he meets him.

Observation: The 1611 King James Version of the English Bible rendered Exodus 20:13 as “Thou shalt not kill.” Later scholarship on Biblical Hebrew has showed that the command uses not the ordinary word for kill but a word for “slaying someone without warrant.” Even without that scholarship, a set of laws like those in Numbers 35 would show that the Hebrews understood the command to allow some sanctioned killing. They took the sixth commandment to say, “Do not murder” (or “kill another human being without the permission of the larger community”).

Application: Many want the Ten Commandments to be a final, timeless set of rules. Israel’s understanding of the sixth commandment makes us aware that just quoting four words doesn’t resolve all ethical questions. Later this week we’ll read Jesus’ teaching about this commandment. He brought deeper meanings from it than his Hebrew children seem to have discerned. Could it be that this was one of those issues (slavery might be another) where God led God’s people as far as they could go in their time and culture, while having more to reveal at a later time?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, some of the commandments sound simple, until I set out to live them. Guide me by your Spirit, so that I may treasure your gift of life. Amen.

Tuesday, March 9

Scripture: Genesis 4:18-19, 23-24; 6:11, 13

Irak was born to Enoch. Irak fathered Mehujael, Mehujael fathered Methushael, and Methushael fathered Lamech. Lamech took two wives, the first named Adah and the second Zillah.

Lamech said to his wives, “Adah and Zillah, listen to my voice; wives of Lamech, pay attention to my words: I killed a man for wounding me, a boy for striking me; so Cain will be paid back seven times and Lamech seventy-seven times.”

In God’s sight, the earth had become corrupt and was filled with violence.

God said to Noah, “The end has come for all creatures, since they have filled the earth with violence. I am now about to destroy them along with the earth.

Observation: In Genesis 4, we read a curious little story fragment about a descendant of Cain named Lamech. In his only appearance in the Bible story, he refers to a murder he committed. And he was bragging to his wives about it! That odd reference may have set the stage for Genesis 6, in which God was heartbroken by the constant level of violence that humans practiced.

Application: In the early years of the 20th century, many people said humanity had progressed far beyond our primitive, violent past. Then World War I began and seriously damaged that confidence in human moral progress. World War II and the Nazi genocide happened about two decades later. More recently, genocidal actions have killed tens of thousands in Rwanda and Darfur. Should it humble us to realize how much like the violent people in the primeval history in Genesis we tend to be? Do you believe it is possible to hate violence without hating the human beings who often practice it?

Prayer: God of creation, teach me that you weep when I or anyone else allows anger and violence to mar your world. And teach me how not to follow in the steps of the long-ago Lamech who bragged about his violence. Amen.

Wednesday, March 10

Scripture: Matthew 5:21-24; 1 John 3:15

“You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, *Don’t commit murder*, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment. If they say to their brother or sister, ‘You idiot,’ they will be in danger of being condemned by the governing council. And if they say, ‘You fool,’ they will be in danger of fiery hell. Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go. First make things right with your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift.

Everyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that murderers don’t have eternal life residing in them.

Observation: In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus widened the sixth commandment’s reach. Contempt, anger, and words that aim to tear down and destroy others are as morally destructive as the physical act of murder, he said. And Jesus lived that out. He didn’t seek to kill his foes, but actually laid down his life for them. In his short letter, John echoed what Jesus taught: that feelings and words of hatred toward others are a destructive type of murder.

Application: What do you think makes it often feel satisfying to express contempt for people who disagree with you or are different, and tear down their reputation? Are there relationships in which you have found it possible to disagree respectfully, seeking common ground rather than win the argument? If so, how can you extend those dynamics to more of your interactions?

Prayer: Dear God, help me in all my dealings with others to focus more on what connects us than on what divides us. Help me exercise discernment, but in a generous, unifying spirit. Amen.

Thursday, March 11

Scripture: Exodus 20:14; Proverbs 6:23-32

Do not commit adultery.

The commandment is a lamp and instruction a light; corrective teaching is the path of life. They guard you from the evil woman, from the flattering tongue of the foreign woman. Don’t desire her beauty in secret; don’t let her take you in with her eyelashes, for a prostitute costs a loaf of bread, but a married woman hunts for a man’s very life. Can a man scoop fire into his lap and his clothes not get burned? If a man walks on hot coals, don’t his feet get burned? So is the

man who approaches his neighbor's wife; anyone who touches her will be punished. People don't despise a thief if he steals to fill his starving stomach. But if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold; he must give all the riches of his house. He who commits adultery is senseless. Doing so, he destroys himself.

Observation: The way that Israel's sages wrote in Proverbs on living out the seventh commandment was accurate, but relatively narrow. Their focus was on "the man who approaches his neighbor's wife." The passage knew that a woman could act seductively ("with her eyelashes"—verse 25), yet in the end it spoke to "he who commits adultery." Violating someone else's committed marriage was (and is) clearly a hurtful choice. But this passage seemed to limit the commandment to only one kind of male action.

Application: Leviticus 20:10 (*If a man commits adultery with a married woman, committing adultery with a neighbor's wife, both the adulterer and the adulteress must be executed.*) defined adultery only as something a man did with a married woman. It said adultery was one of the actions for which ancient Israel executed people. So, they enforced the seventh commandment in a way that showed how they limited the application of the sixth commandment. The Proverbs passage we read today didn't mention execution. What light does that cast on how God's people's sense of the right way to deal with those who didn't keep the commandments shifted over time?

Prayer: God, you have been so patient with your people as, through the centuries, our insight into your vast love and the lives that grow from it has grown. I'm not "there" yet—keep me growing. Amen.

Friday, March 12

Scripture: Matthew 5:27-30

"You have heard that it was said, *Don't commit adultery*. But I say to you that every man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart. 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. 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.

Observation: Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (as recorded in Matthew's gospel) gave much insight into how he saw the Ten Commandments. He made it plain that he took adultery seriously. But as with the 6th commandment, he made it plain that he saw the commandment as reaching far beyond just physical actions. He followed the lead of Israel's prophets in teaching that faithless hearts (as much or more as faithless bodies) deeply hurt relationships.

Application: Jesus expanded the idea of betrayal (as he did for several other parts of life). He said a person's heart (emotions and thoughts) can be faithless to a spouse's needs, even without any overt act. How might it be possible to commit that kind of "adultery" with your career, a favorite hobby or even your children if you gave them a higher priority than loving your spouse? How might a deep commitment to be faithful to your spouse call for changes in you at the heart level? What do you believe Jesus wanted his vivid images to teach you about your inner life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I live in a world full of all kinds of images and messages that tug my thoughts away from your way of life. Give me the courage to “tear out and chop off” any habits or interests that keep me from a faithful life. Amen.

Saturday, March 13

Scripture: Ephesians 5:21-30

And submit to each other out of respect for Christ. For example, wives should submit to their husbands as if to the Lord. A husband is the head of his wife like Christ is head of the church, that is, the savior of the body. So wives submit to their husbands in everything like the church submits to Christ. As for husbands, love your wives just like Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. He did this to make her holy by washing her in a bath of water with the word. He did this to present himself with a splendid church, one without any sort of stain or wrinkle on her clothes, but rather one that is holy and blameless. That’s how husbands ought to love their wives—in the same way as they do their own bodies. Anyone who loves his wife loves himself. No one ever hates his own body, but feeds it and takes care of it just like Christ does for the church because we are parts of his body.

Observation: In Paul’s day, Greek, Roman and Hebrew cultures all took it as a given that women submitted to men. Paul insists that the husband should take as his role model, not a bossy or controlling individual, but Jesus himself. Read as a whole, this passage’s high standard of mutual love and respect for both partners in any marriage illuminated the kind of faithfulness Jesus said the seventh commandment called for.

Application: In his day Paul directed the command to husbands. What would it mean for a husband to love his wife “just like Christ loved the church and gave himself for her”? Do you believe that in God’s plan the same standard applies to wives? Ephesians 5:21 said, “Submit to each other.” It was about mutuality, not something only one party gave while the other took. When and how have you seen mutual “submission” work in healthy marriages?

Prayer: O Jesus, the idea of “giving myself” for someone else, even someone I love, feels scary. Let my gratitude to you for doing just that for me move me beyond fear and into a self-giving life. Amen.