



2019–2020 PW/HORIZONS BIBLE STUDY

LOVE CARVED IN STONE

A Fresh Look at the Ten Commandments

by Eugenia Anne Gamble

With Suggestions for Leaders by Joyce MacKichan Walker

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PW Staff

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PW PURPOSE

Forgiven and freed by God in Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we commit ourselves

- to nurture our faith through prayer and Bible study,
- to support the mission of the church worldwide,
- to work for justice and peace, and
- to build an inclusive, caring community of women that strengthens the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and witnesses to the promise of God's kingdom.

ABOUT THIS BIBLE STUDY

In the late winter/early spring of each year, representatives from Presbyterian Women, Inc.'s Board of Directors gather as a Bible study committee to select a topic and an author for an upcoming Presbyterian Women/*Horizons* Bible study. The process of selecting the topic and the author for each PW/*Horizons* Bible study is filled with intentionality and openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

On February 17, 2016, the Board's Bible study committee selected Eugenia A. Gamble's proposal to write a study based on the Ten Commandments. The 2016 Bible study committee was the first committee to choose the Bible study author and theme at the same time using PW/*Horizons*' new Call for Proposals process.

We give thanks for the creative and enthusiastic women of the 2016 Bible study committee: Elba Rico (chair), Sarah Ford, Judith Jerry, Chris Murphy, Kay Olsen, and Carol Winkler. We look forward to using *Love Carved in Stone: A Fresh Look at the Ten Commandments* to help us study the Bible together this year.

(Please turn to page 115 to read about the groups that field tested *Love Carved in Stone*.)

ABOUT THE BIBLE STUDY AUTHOR



Eugenia Anne Gamble is a PC(USA) pastor who has served the church for more than thirty years. She is an author, speaker, preacher, and retreat leader who loves nothing more than to help the Bible come alive in people's lives. In addition to *Love Carved in Stone*, Eugenia wrote *Glimpses of Home*, the 1995–1996 PW/*Horizons* Bible study. Eugenia is married to Rob Phillips; they live on the central coast of California with their beloved keeshond, Abigail. Eugenia joined her first PW circle in seminary and says she would not have been able to negotiate life without her PW sisters.

ABOUT THE SUGGESTIONS FOR LEADERS AUTHOR



Joyce MacKichan Walker recently retired as the minister of education and mission at Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey, where she served for thirty years. A 1979 graduate of the Presbyterian School of Christian Education (now Union Presbyterian Seminary), her first love has always been teaching. She enjoys consulting in education ministry, writing, and traveling—she'll go almost anywhere!

THINGS TO LOOK FOR IN THE STUDY

Lessons include an opening prayer and a closing prayer. Use the prayers provided, or choose or write your own, to open and close your lessons.

Terms to be defined or described are in the sidebars for easy reference. Information will be close at hand when you need it.

Questions to consider and maybe discuss are called “Pause and Reflect” and are placed within the text of each lesson. When you come to one, take time to read it and follow where it leads.

Suggestions for Leaders follow each lesson of *Love Carved in Stone* and contain more than enough teaching activities for one hour of group study. We know that groups use PW/*Horizons* Bible studies in different ways and for varying lengths of time. Check out the alternatives for groups who have less time available. Read *About the Suggestions for Leaders* on page 9 to learn more about this valuable leader resource.

The Scope and Sequence on page 8 provides an overview of the entire study. The titles, scripture, and purpose of each lesson can be found in the Scope and Sequence.

Joyce MacKichan Walker, author of the Suggestions for Leaders and the Workshop for Leaders, prepared a list of suggested hymns for *Love Carved in Stone*. The list of hymns is part of the Workshop for Leaders. Go to www.presbyterianwomen.org to download or order this free resource—HZN19101.

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A Fresh Look at the Ten Commandments

BY EUGENIA ANNE GAMBLE

With Suggestions for Leaders by Joyce MacKichan Walker

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INTRODUCTION

1 Covenant

In the Bible, a covenant is a mutually agreed upon contract that is binding on both parties. There are a number of these agreements in the Bible, both between humans, and between God and human beings. In traditional Reformed theology, Covenant is seen as the central organizational principle that underlies all of salvation history. God binds Godself to us and we bind ourselves to God. This mutual binding always moves us toward greater and greater fulfillment and blessing. Through this deep and reciprocal commitment, our relationship with God grows and we become partners with God in the healing and redeeming work of God's kingdom.

Fifteen years ago, I began serious work with the Ten Commandments. Up until that time, I thought I knew the Ten Commandments backward and forward. I had learned them in Vacation Bible School, after all. Most of the time I even managed to keep them, or so I thought. In seminary I showed up for class and learned the difference between simple moralisms that kept me out of trouble and the deep things of a Covenant agreement with God that underlay all of divine-human relationships. It was not, however, until the summer of 2003 that I realized how much further I had to go to grasp and be grasped by these amazing texts. 1

Here is what happened. I was spending a month alone for writing leave on a tiny island off the coast of Nova Scotia. At the time, I was pastor of First Presbyterian Church Birmingham, in my home state of Alabama. I spent that lovely month in a small cabin overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. The TV in the cabin got one station, from Boston. Each evening, as I looked out over the berm of wild roses to the ocean and the tiny lighthouse in the distance, I dutifully watched the evening news. That is what I was doing when images of chaos from the state capital in Montgomery seared across the screen. A group of people had gathered to protest the moving of a statue of the Ten Commandments from the capitol rotunda to another room in the capitol building. Passionate people of every stripe lined the capitol steps. Reporters, caught up in the frenzy, thrust microphones in front of as many faces as they could manage.

At one point, a man in a gray business suit, clean-shaven, with neat salt-and-pepper hair, threw himself on the statue and screamed, "You will not take away my God!" It took my breath away. It stopped my world spinning on its axis. "Wait," I thought, "it's a statue." Can God be taken away if a statue is moved? What was it about the Ten Commandments that roused the intensity of this passion? It was right then that I felt compelled to go more deeply into these scriptures. In that moment, I somehow knew that these sacred words are about more than staying away from idols, not cussing, and staying true to marriage vows. And so, with these images from my home fresh in my consciousness, the journey that led to this study began.

The Ten Commandments can be studied fruitfully on many levels. We can take them literally. We can see them as symbols of a way of life or a particular ideology. We can even see them as the basic building blocks of our society, building blocks that lie at the core of each of the Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.) In this study, I encourage you to go deeper than you may have thought to go before. I invite you to consider how these commands were understood in their earliest forms and how that understanding can unlock fresh insights for our lives today.

Biblical Context

During their time of wilderness wandering,² following their miraculous deliverance from Egyptian slavery, the people of God had much to learn before they could enter into the land God promised them. They had to learn what freedom meant and what its limits were. They had to learn obedience and the consequences of thinking they knew better than God. Their “enslaved people” mentality had to be replaced with a “chosen people” mentality. As the wilderness time drew on, the people found themselves frustrated, immobilized, and feeling desperately impotent. Those feelings led to looking backward fondly, even to slavery in Egypt. They began to long wistfully for the things that the Egyptian Empire had provided, even in the presence of all it had denied. The people were unable to imagine or believe in a way of life that would be fundamentally different from the frightened, self-absorbed, resigned existence of the moment. Believing that life could be different, that God’s promise of freedom and land could be true, not just in principle but also for them, was the first step out of the wilderness.

When wilderness had become simultaneously the norm, a self-fulfilling prophecy, and a way of life, God decided to intervene by speaking a new kind of community into being. We call this speech the Ten Commandments.³ We find these commandments, in similar form, in both Exodus (Ch. 20) and Deuteronomy (Ch. 5), but with enough differences between them to remind us that the texts are dynamic and have been interpreted to speak to different contexts, historical moments, and circumstances. They are alive with God’s heart for all generations. They are the values of God and have the power to cut through stone, but they are too creative to ever finally be contained on tablets or monuments. They are words both carved on stone tablets and lovingly written into the hearts of God’s people. They are the words that shape Israel’s, and our own, destinies.

God's Speech: The Ten Words

Interestingly, nowhere in the Hebrew text does the word for “commandment” appear. In the Bible, these utterances are called just what they are: “Words.”⁴ This does not make them mere suggestions, however. From the beginning of our family faith story, we have seen that God brings something new into being through speech. In the creation stories we are told, “And God *said* . . . and it was so.” Just as God created all things by speech, the powerful creative force of God’s speech to the people in the wilderness brings a new kind of community into being. This new community is an alternative to the dominant culture of violence, privilege, and isolation that they have known.

One way to consider the Ten Words is as a love letter from God to that community stuck in the wilderness. These words are both addressed to the community and, in new ways, *create* that community. That was true in the wilderness and it is true for us now. God both addresses us personally in these words and creates with them a new community of us. The Ten Words are an invitation into a passionate life with God and with each other that is fundamentally different from the lives we have led heretofore. Each of the Ten Words offers a salve, a healing balm, for a core wound in the human experience. They provide boundaries within which we can live in freedom and peace. These Words both warn *and* encourage. As the *Westminster Catechism*⁵ reminds us, “[W]here a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded.” To put it another way, the Ten Words, by

2 Wilderness

Wilderness refers to both a literal place and to a spiritual condition. The experience of wilderness is often one of preparation or testing. Important turning points in the Bible often take place in the wilderness. Being in the wilderness is a time of fitting oneself for new life and new challenges.

3 The Law

The Law refers to the Ten Commandments and the numerous interpretive statutes developed by rabbis throughout the centuries to guide the people in implementing the Commandments. Sometimes the terms *the Law*, referring to the Ten Commandments, and *the laws*, referring to the rules based on the Ten Commandments, are used interchangeably.

4 Words

Words! Words! Words! It can be confusing at first to refer to the Ten Commandments as the Ten Words. We are accustomed to speaking of Jesus as the Word, or the Bible itself as God’s Word, but we may never have thought of the Ten Commandments in that way. Even though it takes getting used to, I’ve chosen to retain the term *Ten Words* because it is the biblical form and can help open us up to looking at them in fresh ways.

5 Westminster Catechism

A statement of faith written in 1646–47 by a group of theologians of the Churches of England and Scotland. It remains a theological benchmark for the PC(USA) and is included in its *Book of Confessions*.¹

6 The Promise

Throughout this study when you see the word Promise capitalized it refers to the Promise given by God to Abraham and Sarah (Abram and Sarai), the Promise in which God gives them land, blessing, offspring, and a mission. The Promised Land is not just a place. It is where and when the fullness of God's desire for God's people is manifest.

7 Mishnah, Talmud, Torah

The Mishnah is the first major compilation of the Jewish oral tradition. The Talmud is a collection of authoritative teachings that interpret the Torah and includes nearly 1,000 years of debates and discussions on scripture, beginning in about 200 BCE. Torah generally refers to the first five books of the Bible. Sometimes the Torah includes the prophets and the writings and rabbinic commentary.

telling us what to avoid, also point us toward the behaviors we must embrace. When we look beneath the surface of these words, we, too, can find a call to deeper communion with God and a new understanding of the beauty and challenges of life together. As we read this love letter, we hear in it God's longing for a way of life for us that will bring us harmony and joy. Moral behavior matters, not simply because actions can anger or disappoint God, but because principled behavior is how love becomes real, both toward God and in community.

God called a community into being in a new way on Sinai. God transformed a broken people into a people with a renewed hope for the future. God transformed a lost people into a found people with a purpose to their story and their journey. God transformed a people trapped in nostalgia into a people who could rejoice in the now. People unsure of what to do to get unstuck were invited to find the life abundant that came with the Promise (Gen. 12:1–3) and were given the guidance they needed. Yet, this new way of life has never been easy.⁶

The Role of Mosaic Law for Christians

For centuries our ancestors pondered the Law from Sinai. They wanted to understand every nuance of meaning in the Ten Words. Eventually, that desire led to 613 laws, called *mitzvot*, which were required of all faithful Jews. These laws, compiled in the Mishnah, give guidance on the specifics of daily living.⁷

The Ten Words, and the interpretive laws, gave a sense of identity to the Hebrew people as well as the security of knowing what God expected. While Christians do not look to the Law as a way to gain right standing with God, we do recognize that the heart of God's moral will is articulated in the Law. John Calvin, in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, a foundational document for Presbyterian and Reformed theology from the Reformation period, teaches that moral law serves as a mirror in which we can see where we need to change.² It is in that reflection that we also disabuse ourselves of the notion of our own virtue. A careful study of the Law not only helps us know how to please God but also gives guidance for establishing habits that allow for our continued transformation more and more into the likeness of Christ. Studying the Ten Commandments is not intended to produce excessive guilt! As you move through this study you may find yourself feeling helpless to address the implications of these Words in their broadest sense. I invite you to simply engage the Words. Let God use them to transform you. Once that transformation begins, the next steps will become clear.

Jesus as Word of God

To begin his Gospel, the evangelist John describes Jesus as the “word (*logos*) of God.” Jesus as the perfect expression of God is also the perfect expression of the Law lived out. If you want to understand what the Ten Words mean for a life, look at the life of Jesus. If you want to understand the heart of Jesus and, therefore, the heart of God, look at the values expressed in the Law. Jesus' role with the Law was never to destroy it. Jesus' role was to make it plain to us and to provide the avenue of grace needed to allow us to stay in relationship with God even when, despite our best efforts, we are unable to live according to God's standards in a consistent way.

Staying in the Hebrew Scriptures and Moving into the New Testament

As we work together through this study, each lesson will begin with an exploration of the Words in their biblical contexts. From there we will consider a moment from Jesus' life that shows us how Jesus lived out that Word. We will then consider the Word for our own lives and contexts. We will conclude with an invitation to pray with the Word in our circles or study groups and in our personal devotions.

Basic Questions to Hold in Your Hearts

In a time of increasing relativism (the belief that truth and knowledge are contextual and that nothing is absolute), what does it mean to be a moral person? Or, more precisely, what does it mean to be a moral Christian, both in personal and communal life? How do we live out our relationship with God and with one another in a world that is often ruled by other standards? What is the pain from which God seeks to protect us in the Ten Words? How can a fresh embrace of these Words contribute to our restoration and to the restoration of our communities, and further the Gospel in the world?

Love Carved in Stone Companion DVD



Welcome to the 2019–2020 PW/*Horizons* Bible study, *Love Carved in Stone: A Fresh Look at the Ten Commandments*. As you begin your study, know that leader (and reader) helps are available in many places! You can find resources online (www.presbyterianwomen.org; just click on the Bible study link); in the pages of *Horizons* magazine (beginning with the July/August 2019 issue; to subscribe, visit www.presbyterianwomen.org and click on the *Horizons* link or call 866/802-3635); and the always helpful *Workshop for Leaders* (available as a free download or from our shop, www.presbyterianwomen.org/shop; order item HZN19101).

If you are searching for a video introduction to the study (and each of the nine lessons of the study), the *Love Carved in Stone* companion DVD is, well, the perfect companion! In the video portion of the DVD, Eugenia A. Gamble discusses the meaning of each lesson in this study. The DVD also includes downloadable resources.

Love Carved in Stone Companion DVD—Order item HZN19103 from www.presbyterianwomen.org/shop; \$20.00, plus shipping; see page 119 for order information.

LESSON SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

Lesson One

Words of Love: I Am Your God; You Shall Have No Others

The First and Second Words

Scripture: Exodus 20:1–6 and Matthew 22:34–37

Purpose: The purpose of Lesson One is to explore God’s self-revelation in the Ten Words and our call to embrace God as our One and Only.

Lesson Two

Words of Love: Don’t Trivialize My Name

The Third Word

Scripture: Exodus 20:7 and Matthew 7:21–23

Purpose: The purpose of Lesson Two is to understand the power of God’s name and our call to use it rightly.

Lesson Three

Words of Love: Keep Sabbath

The Fourth Word

Scripture: Exodus 20:8–11, Deuteronomy 5:12–15, and Mark 2:23–28

Purpose: The purpose of Lesson Three is to understand the gift of Sabbath and to recover a sense of the sacred urgency of Sabbath-keeping for human life and the created order.

Lesson Four

Words of Love: Honor the Life-givers

The Fifth Word

Scripture: Exodus 20:12 and Luke 9:57–62

Purpose: The purpose of Lesson Four is to explore the gift of life and our responsibility to those who bring us to life.

Lesson Five

Words of Love: Don’t Kill Each Other

The Sixth Word

Scripture: Exodus 20:13 and Matthew 5:21–26

Purpose: The purpose of Lesson Five is to understand the many faces of murder and how the beloved community is to honor life by refusing any and all death-dealing behaviors.

Lesson Six

Words of Love: Hold Your Marriages Sacred

The Seventh Word

Scripture: Exodus 20:14, Genesis 2:18–25, and John 8:1–11

Purpose: The purpose of Lesson Six is to understand God’s desire for deep and faithful relationships in the human family and how behavior that has no boundaries can devastate people and communities.

Lesson Seven

Words of Love: Do Not Steal

The Eighth Word

Scripture: Exodus 20:15 and Matthew 25:31–46

Purpose: The purpose of Lesson Seven is to expand our understanding of stealing beyond the concept of disrespect for personal property.

Lesson Eight

Words of Love: Speak Truthfully

The Ninth Word

Scripture: Exodus 20:16, Deuteronomy 5:20, and Matthew 12:36–37

Purpose: The purpose of Lesson Eight is to consider the dual emphases of this Word: the importance of a trustworthy judicial system and the necessity of basic honesty for the stability of community.

Lesson Nine

Words of Love: Don’t Fixate on What You Don’t Have

The Tenth Word

Scripture: Exodus 20:17 (18–21); 1 Kings 21:1–16; and Luke 12:13–15

Purpose: The purpose of Lesson Nine is to examine the meaning of “to covet” and to identify the ways greed and predatory desire affect our lives and communities.

ABOUT THE SUGGESTIONS FOR LEADERS

The Suggestions for Leaders that follow each lesson of *Love Carved in Stone* contain more than enough teaching activities for one hour of group study. Groups with less time together have more opportunities to make activity choices based on their own needs. Leaders may choose what they and their group enjoy, but be adventurous and look carefully at all the choices. Don't worry about missing anything because you don't have time to do it all! I learned from a very wise teacher that when you try to do too much, rather than *uncovering* important knowledge, you cover the opportunity to experience and take to heart what is most important.

Suggestions for Leaders activities promote the reality that we learn by doing. Leaders are not expected to be experts, participants are responsible for their own learning, and questions are open-ended and allow for many responses. Here's my favorite response to a thoughtful and provocative question: "Great question! How do all of you respond?"

Leaders will find six headings in each lesson plan. Knowing what the activities under each heading are intended to do may help you make choices in line with your goals for each lesson.

Central Concept is a statement about the main content of the lesson plan from the perspective of its purpose.

Come Together activities help participants get acquainted (in the early lessons), then focus on approaching the lesson's purpose from each participant's own experience.

Connect has a two-fold purpose—to begin to connect one's personal experience to the theme of the lesson and to briefly engage with the "core wound" that the author identifies for each commandment, in turn.

Consider and Converse is where participants explore the content of the lesson material by examining what each Word (or commandment) meant in the early Hebrew community, and what Jesus had to say by way of interpretation or practice. This is where participants grapple with the breadth of meaning in each of the Words in this "love letter from God."

Care and Commit invites participants to respond to what they have learned by listening intently for how a particular Word speaks to them, and how it might transform their lives in some way—large or small, personally or in community.

Commune and Close is usually done in a gathered circle. It is a brief ending that offers an opportunity to hear words of wisdom, support one another in commitment, and affirm God's never-ending, redeeming love in prayer.

Note: Leaders of Lesson Seven, there is special preparation for this lesson; it is found at the end of Lesson Six. If different leaders take responsibility for the lessons, don't miss this preparation.



Love Carved in Stone on the web!

Bible study helps, including lesson summaries and outlines, as well as the Workshop for Leaders, and more, are available on PW's web pages. Check for the monthly Bible study blog beginning in late summer 2019. Visit www.presbyterianwomen.org.

ABOUT THE ART

Through the centuries, artists have been drawn to the drama and poignancy of the story of the Ten Commandments and have illustrated the interaction between God, Moses, and God’s people in visual art, film, and even YouTube videos! This study takes a thematic approach and examines what each commandment has to say to us today. You will see the image of Moses only on the cover because, collectively, we know that image and that part of the story.

The art for this Bible study was chosen carefully and offers a fresh perspective on the Ten Commandments. We found images from artists around the globe. Each image is either directly inspired by a commandment, or it carries an essential theme or feeling that the commandment or “Word” portrays. Each Word is revealed as guidance from God to God’s people, meant to help us stay in right relationship with our community, our world, and ourselves. We hope that each image is revelatory and offers a new perspective on these guiding principles.



Cover
Moses
Rae Chichilnitsky
Pennsylvania, United States

About the Artist: Rae Chichilnitsky is a freelance artist and illustrator. She was born in Kishinev (Republic of Moldova, then part of the Soviet Union). In 1976 she emigrated to America and settled in New York. Currently, she resides in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Rae’s artwork involves multiple genres, media, applications, subjects, and techniques. She gravitates toward bold, contrasting colors and expressive forms. Her imagery radiates strong, positive energy and carries a symbolic message.



About the Art from the Artist: “*Moses* is my vision of a great man on a mission from God transcending his human limitations with Divine help. He’s coming down from the greatest, humanly possible, spiritual height and about to face one of his greatest disappointments—the worship of the Golden Calf by his own people, to whom he’s bringing the Words of the Almighty. How will they receive them? Will they listen to him? Will they believe in the Word of God? There’s a lot of uncertainty and fatigue in Moses’s facial expression. Is he ready to face yet another test after so many hardships and challenges?” See more of Rae’s work at <https://rae-chichilnitsky.pixels.com>.

Why We Chose the Art: Even though the study is not about Moses but about God’s love letter to God’s people, the bold colors the artist uses and Moses’ look of love and worry (fear? weariness?) she portrays spoke to us and we

decided to put Moses on the cover. How would you look if you had just been in the presence of God?

Credit: *Moses* © Rae Chichilnitsky. Used with permission of the artist.



Lesson One
I Will Help You
Chris Duffett
Cambridge, England

About the Artist: Chris Duffett is a Baptist minister, photographer, artist, and writer.



He lives near Cambridge, England, with wife Ruth and their three young children. His two passions are evangelism and art. He says of his ministry: “I love to reach out to people from all walks of life, I believe that the message of Jesus is relevant today and has the ability to transform other people’s lives like he has changed mine. I believe

that it is only through Jesus that we may find true peace with God.”

About the Art from the Artist: “The scripture reference for *I Will Help You* is ‘For I am the LORD your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, “Do not fear; I will help you”’ (Is. 41:13). It may be hard to see the scribbled writing that takes two contrasting stances. Take a closer look. One hand declares ‘hated,’ the other ‘loved.’ The hated hand has words associated with self loathing, like ‘I have nothing’ and ‘hopeless.’ The other declares positive statements such as ‘I am with you,’ ‘I have called you,’ and ‘Joy is yours.’” See more at www.chrisduffett.com.

Why We Chose This Art: Before you even read the words written on each hand, the image speaks of the First Word:

“I am yours.” God belongs to us and we belong to God.

Credit: *I Will Help You* ©Chris Duffett. Used with permission of the artist.



Lesson Two *Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain*

Karolina Gacke
Poland

About the Artist: Karolina Gacke was born 1975 in Poland and grew up in Nigeria. After graduating with a degree in African arts and cultures from the University of Warsaw, she traveled the world. Exposure to different cultures made a strong imprint on her artistic expression. She has worked and learned with artists around the world and currently resides in Brixen, South Tyrol, Italy, and Bangkok, Thailand.



About the Art from the Artist: “*Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain* is part of a series called *10*, a look at the Ten Commandments. I confronted myself with the biblical Ten Commandments and I asked myself the following questions: What is their meaning in this globalized world of uncontained consumerism and social media? How do the commandments influence the living together of people of different origin and religion? And what importance do they have for my own life's conduct? I don't provide answers I hope to start a discussion about values in today's modern world, the meaning of The Ten Commandments and the way we interpret these ‘rules’ today.” See more at www.theartofkarolina.com.

Why We Chose This Art: This art illustrates how we call on God in ways that trivialize the name of God by praying for a winning lotto number, a fix to some current problem, or a rationalization for a policy or power play.

Credit: *Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain* © Karolina Gacke. Used with permission of the artist.



Lesson Three *Day of Rest* **Ethel V. Ashton** Philadelphia, United States

About the Artist: Ethel V. Ashton (1896–1975) was born and raised in West Philadelphia and studied art at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women. She was influenced by the

“Ashcan School,” a group of New York City artists who sought to capture the feel of early–twentieth-century New York City, through realistic portraits of everyday life. Using people whom she encountered on the streets as models, her depictions of modern Philadelphia “are wonderful for their spontaneity and their focus on the diversity of the individuals who share the urban environment.” *Day of Rest*, completed in 1944, is an example of the beauty and simplicity of such a scene. See more at <https://woodmereartmuseum.org/explore-online/collection/artist/ethel-v-ashton>.

Why We Chose This Art: This image of peace, community, family, and rest seems to illustrate the meaning of Sabbath: to stop work and everyday toils, and to be truly in God's creation.

Credit: Woodmere Art Museum; gift of Elaine D. and Bruce M. Ashton, 2013.



Lesson Four *Belonging* **Shanna Strauss** Montreal, Canada

About the Artist: Shanna Strauss is a Tanzanian-American artist who lives and works in Montreal. She completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the California College of Arts and has exhibited in solo and group shows in Tanzania, Canada, the United States, and Senegal.



Her artist statement reads: “As a Tanzanian-American, biracial, bilingual woman, I have always been interested in the reality of having to navigate multiple identities, geographic locations, histories and cultures. Using a mixed media approach, I currently explore themes related to identity and belonging; what we as people of the African Diaspora bring with us when we settle in new locations, and how we inform the social fabric of the place we now call home.”

About the Art from the Artist: “I created this piece for a book titled *Frames for Life, Liberation and Belonging* put together by the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society.³ The book features the artworks of 10 artists paired with social justice movements and thinkers. In the piece I created, I wanted to represent what belonging looked like. For me, an important aspect of belonging is creating spaces where young people can be supported by the community around them so that they can be free to live their best lives and achieve their dreams.” See more at <https://www.shannastrauss.com>.

Why We Chose This Art: This image speaks of honoring life—past, present, and future—from ancestors to future generations, and is rich in symbolism. Roots, birds, leaves, a set of hands that hold a young girl—all look for what’s next. Is it the future?

Credit: *Belonging* © Shanna Strauss. Used with permission of the artist.



Lesson Five
Thou Shalt Not Kill
Nancy Spero
New York City, United States

About the Artist: Nancy Spero (1926–2009) was an American visual artist. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, Spero lived for much of her life in New York City. As both artist and activist, Nancy Spero had a career that spanned fifty years. She is known for her continuous engagement with contemporary political, social, and cultural concerns. Spero chronicled wars and apocalyptic violence and articulated visions of ecstatic rebirth



and the celebratory cycles of life. Her well-known 1966–1970 *War* series, produced during the Vietnam years, explored the atrocities of war.

About the Art: *Thou Shalt Not Kill* was created as part of the 1987 portfolio *The Ten Commandments*, in which ten top Jewish American artists were each invited to choose an Old Testament commandment to interpret in contemporary lithographic form. Lisa Liebmann, who wrote the introduction to the collection, observed: “When it comes to the Sixth Commandment, Nancy Spero can be considered a fundamentalist. *Thou Shalt Not Kill* could serve as the title for almost all of her work . . . Spero’s image and its meaning are without irony or ambivalence. They are not, however, devoid of ambiguity, for the figure—based on a photograph of a Vietnamese woman fleeing attack—is not the image of a victim, but of a warrior performing a warrior’s dance, an unarmed hawk against violence . . .”⁴

Why We Chose This Art: This image is jarring in its emotional intensity and clearly expresses the cost of violence. We also like its historic story, and feel that it expresses sadness, grief, rage, and power.

Credit: Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Deknatel Purchase Fund



Lesson Six
Ketubah
Rachel Leibman
San Francisco, United States

About the Artist: Rachel Leibman is a collage and mixed-media artist who lives in San Francisco. *New York Art Beat* said of her work, “She first started painting in acrylics and then oils, tried collage and found her voice in this medium where the small colored pieces of cut paper became her palette. ‘Painting’ colorful, detailed, and often-elaborate



pictures composed of images of ancient manuscripts, Leibman consciously uses manuscripts of different religions, languages, and styles—to pay homage to those who came before and celebrate the uniqueness of our varied heritages. At the same time, the collages—rich in color, texture, and imaginative imagery, express the human interconnectedness and cultural melding that is our global society” (2008).

About the Art: A ketubah is a special type of Jewish prenuptial agreement that is often also a traditional form of Jewish ceremonial art. Couples hang ketubah in their homes to remind them of their contract with and commitment to each other. This ketubah replaces the written rights and responsibilities of marriage with images of marriage.

Why We Chose This Art: We chose this ketubah to illustrate the commandment to hold marriages sacred because it combines photos of traditional wedding images—rings and people in wedding clothes from many generations. The shape of the two columns echoes the tablets of the commandments. And because it is a piece of sacred ceremonial art, it expresses the sacredness of the bonds we share in our intimate relationships.

Credit: *Ketubah* © Rachel Leibman. Used with permission of the artist.



Lesson Seven
The Thief
Massimiliano Ligabue
Maleo, Italy

About the Artist: Massimiliano Ligabue was born in 1972 in Codogno, Italy. He is a self-taught painter who



began painting when he was 14, when his father bought him an easel. He credits his skillful painting to making mistakes and the pleasure he gets from realizing that he still has a lot to learn.

About the Art From the Artist: “With *The Thief*, I wanted to convey the desperation of the thief who has just realized that what he was really looking for cannot be stolen.”

Why We Chose This Art: This image can be interpreted in at least two different ways. First, we see a thief who has ransacked someone’s room in search of things to steal; a thief who is having a moment of regret and sorrow. Then we see the victim of the crime who sits in sorrow and disbelief. In both interpretations, the effect is devastating. Muted colors portray the melancholy of the subject, and the chaos of the belongings on the floor reflects the inner turmoil of the thief and the victim.

Credit: *The Thief* © Massimiliano Ligube. Used with permission of the artist.



Lesson Nine
Never Enough
Diane Savona
San Francisco, United States

About the Artist: Diane Savona is a textile artist who lives in Passaic, New Jersey. Her art presents domestic artifacts in an archaeological context. As she honors previous generations of women, she creates art that changes the viewer’s perception of our textile heritage. Her work has been shown in galleries and museums, and on the cover of *FiberArts Magazine*. She was a fellow at the Center for Emerging Visual Artists in Philadelphia, and a winner of a 2008 New Jersey Council on the Arts Fellowship Award.



Lesson Eight
Gossip
David Obi
Oslo, Norway

About the Artist: David Obi is a contemporary artist who was born in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1980. After David studied art at the Yaba College of Art and Technology in Nigeria, he moved to Sweden, to a small town called Karlskoga, and later, to Gothenburg, where he was inspired by



the architectural structure and beauty of the city. He now lives and works in Norway. David paints in oil and acrylic; his work conveys many layers of meaning. Capturing the complexities of people’s emotions and inner nature are among his favorite topics. He also paints the beautiful, sweeping landscapes of Africa and Sweden. See more of his work at www.saatchiart.com/jackiebrown

Why This Art was Chosen: An intense image of people gossiping and listening to gossip, we feel that this image expresses the destructive power of speaking untruths to one another.

Credit: *Gossip* © David Obi. Photograph by Krystian Gregorczyk. Used with permission of the artist.

About the Art from the Artist: “In our post 9/11 society, we have become ever more fearful. Security is our overriding concern. *Never Enough* takes this anxiety to far extremes, the head overflowing with embedded codes and every inch crammed with locks, holds, and clamps. No matter how hard we try, we will never be truly, absolutely safe . . . and we will buy any device that promises that safety. I have a theory: in generations past, we saw actual, real people more than we saw printed images of people. Now, we see hundreds of perfect photo-bodies for every real person we encounter, and our perception of beauty has been warped by the disconnect. In the same way, we no longer endure the horrors of war, famine and pestilence, but we are inundated with images and stories of every possible catastrophe every minute of the day. Maybe that’s why we’re so fearful. We cling tightly and our heads explode with passwords, PINs, codes and combinations. It will never be enough.” See more of her work (and read her blog) at dianesavonaart.com. To see an interview with Diane that includes discussion of this piece, visit <http://conversations.jigsy.com/savona>.

Why This Art Was Chosen: This image shows what happens when we fixate on what we don’t have (and can never fully get): surety, security, safety. The person who wears this garment has locked themselves away from the outside world in order to achieve security and has lost any possibility of connection with others.

Credit: *Never Enough* © Diane Savona. Used with permission of the artist.



I Will Help You, Chris Duffett

WORDS OF LOVE:
I AM YOUR GOD;
YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHERS



LESSON ONE

THE FIRST AND SECOND WORDS

Scripture: Exodus 20:1–6 and Matthew 22:34–37

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments (Ex. 20:1–6).

Purpose

The purpose of Lesson One is to explore God's self-revelation in the Ten Words and our call to embrace God as our One and Only.

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, you have brought us to life and to this place. We are grateful. Touch us with your presence in our time together. Fill us with a sense of your love. Open our hearts and minds to greet you in new ways. Help us to love and serve you only. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Opening the Envelope

The Ten Words were given to Israel in a time of pluralism (many different beliefs and perspectives) and idolatry. It was ever thus. God's Words calling us to faithfulness and to create the beloved community always rise afresh to our ears when needed most. While the Words were given to a particular people at a particular moment in their history, they are universally applicable. We still desire personal connection with God. We still seek clarity in making our moral decisions. We still thirst for freedom from the things that limit us. So, we approach the Words with all the longing and hope that the people of Israel held in their hearts so many years ago.

These Words are about identity. They are about who God is and who we are called to be in relationship with God. **With the First Word, God offers the salve of personal relationship to treat the wound of human beings' essential loneliness and sense of separation from God.** We are not alone in the universe; the Creator of all that is loves

① Numbering the Words.

Various Christian traditions number the Ten Words differently. Most differences involve where to divide the First and Second Words. Some traditions, including some Jewish groups, believe that the first two Words are actually one and that there are only nine Commandments in total, three sets of three. For our purposes we will use the traditional Reformed numbering system. In that system, the First Word is the call to exclusive relationship with God. The Second is the command against images and idolatry.

② Moses

Born into slavery in Egypt, Moses was spirited away from harm by his mother and sister, adopted by an Egyptian princess, and raised as a prince of Egypt. As an adult, he saw an Egyptian soldier beating a Hebrew slave. He was filled with rage at the injustice, killed the soldier, buried him in the sand, and fled to the desert. There he married Zipporah and went to work for his father-in-law, Jethro. It was when he was out tending Jethro's flock that God spoke to him from within a burning bush and told him that he was to go back to Egypt to speak to Pharaoh and set the Hebrew people free from slavery.

us and works constantly on our behalf. We belong to God and God belongs to us.

With the Second Word, God addresses human beings' fearful desire for quick fixes to salve the wound of helplessness. We do not have to look outside of God for power, especially not to the gods of our own devices and desires. God's love letter to us begins with God's desire to be our One and Only. ①

The First Word: I Am Yours (Exodus 20:1–3)

It was a sunny day, in that way I have only seen in California; a white-yellow sun warmed the bench that sat on a cliff by the Pacific. My husband Robbie and I had been dating for about a year and a half. This was the third time he asked me to marry him. I was scared. I had failed at marriage before and was determined that I would never do that again. When the words left his mouth, I felt myself backing away. I wanted to be with him, but I didn't feel up to it. All I could see were the failures of the past. Suddenly, Robbie took my face in his two hands and said, "Look at me. I am not that guy. I am *your* guy." That moment changed everything.

When God speaks those first breathy words in Exodus 20:1, "I am the LORD *your* God . . . you shall have no other gods before me," it is just such a life-changing moment. The Ten Words begin with that same kind of universe-changing declaration of love: "I am *yours*."

The people of Israel must have been as scared as I was. After all, they had been through a lot. They had lived through the family turmoil that led Joseph's brothers to sell him into slavery (Gen. 37:12f). They had followed his rise to prominence in Egypt and the family's ultimate reconciliation (Gen. 39–50). They had shuddered when a Pharaoh arose who did not remember, a Pharaoh who ultimately enslaved them in an attempt to corral their strength for the good of the empire (Ex. 1). They had welcomed the birth of Israel's greatest national hero, Moses (Ex. 2f), ② and his story of unexpected leadership from slavery to Promised Land. Through all of that, Israel's path had never been a straight, even road.

By the time we pick up the story in Exodus 20, the people have made the journey through the waters of chaos and watched the power of Egypt drown in the justice of God (Ex. 14). They have not yet learned, however, the lessons of freedom that will be needed to take them into the Land of Promise. They have not yet learned what it means to be a priestly kingdom—that is, one that brings God to the world. They are in danger of falling back into the familiar lies of bondage, the lies of the slaveholder who says, "But I took care of you. You had plenty to eat, meat stew and onions."

God had to do something, or all of the beauty of the promise that God made to Abraham and Sarah (land, progeny, blessing) would be lost. So, God asked Moses to gather the people together to speak to them directly. The words that God speaks are the words we have before us in the Ten Words. ③ Miraculously, the long years of pain and slavery in Egypt have come to an end. Now the people must learn what it means to live in freedom. In the wilderness there are things that must be worked *out* of them and other things that must be worked *into* them. God's values must be kneaded deeply into the essence of community for them to have any hope of attaining the promise. The Ten Words are their instructions. ④

Rachel S. Mikva, editor of the marvelous book *Broken Tablets: Restoring the Ten Commandments and Ourselves*, invites the reader to engage the Commandments this way:

When the Holy One gave the Torah, no bird chirped, no fowl flew, no ox lowed, not one angel stirred its wing or sang its song. The sea did not roar. Creatures did not speak. The whole world was hushed into breathless silence. It was then that the voice went forth: “I am the Lord your God . . .” With each and every word of the Holy One, the entire world was filled with a unique fragrance of spice. Each and every word broke into seventy languages as it spread, filling the earth with the teaching of God. Torah was given in the wilderness so all could receive it, and anyone who ever did or ever will embrace the covenant, stood at Sinai, saw the thunder and lightning, smelled the fragrance, and heard the word in a way that he or she could understand.¹

The First Word (“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”) is spoken to the people in the singular tense. It is a personal declaration to each of us. Of course, its communal implications are immense. In this Word, God, simply with speech, creates a new community. Still, God speaks God’s desires to each of us personally.

A startling aspect of this verse is the word *your*. God begins this new love story by saying “I belong to you.” God declares Godself to Israel much as suitors did in generations past. God begins this personal address to the people in a most intimate way. “I am yours.” As is always the case, God makes the first commitment. Even before we dream to commit to God, even in the midst of our confusions and fears, God has already committed to us.

With this personal declaration, God discloses God’s essential nature. Scholars ponder at length why it is that God chose the particular self description “who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” Why didn’t God say, “I am the creator of the universe,” or “the Lord of all the heavenly hosts,” or even “the God of your ancestors”? In a sense, choosing to say, “I am the God who brought you out of the land of Egypt” locates God in a particular story for a particular people.

Pause and Reflect. Does locating these Words in a specific time, place, and people imply that the Ten Words have relevance only to the Jewish people? If that is the case, why are the Ten Commandments also considered foundational to both Christians’ and Muslims’ faith practice?

One key to understanding this Word lies in the use of the Hebrew word *mitzrayim*. The root for this word is *tsur*, which means “troubles.” *Mitzrayim* has been understood over the years by students of Torah to refer to Egypt, the *place* of troubles, and to Egypt, the *condition* of bondage. *Mitzrayim* often refers to anything that restricts or narrows our lives and freedom. God is the God who brings God’s people out of slavery. God is the God of freedom. First and foremost, in the creation of this new community at Sinai, God declares in essence (paraphrase my own), “I am yours and I am about your freedom.”

3 The Ten Words in the Old Testament

The Ten Words appear in two places in the Old Testament: Exodus 20:1–17 and Deuteronomy 5:1–21. The Words differ slightly in the two versions, helping us to understand that their meaning and application unfold and expand in the living of them over time. In Exodus, the Words are given in the midst of wilderness-wandering, when the people have found their way to the holy mountain, Sinai. In Deuteronomy, Moses repeats the Words with the perspective of time so that the people can remember their journey with God and what that means for everything that will come later.

4 Mitzvot

The Hebrew Law contains 613 specific statutes and ordinances. All 613 are legal and spiritual interpretations of the Ten Words. To understand this, we might consider the U.S. Constitution. All of our laws somehow flow from that foundational document. It was the same for the people of Israel. The laws and statutes, called *Mitzvot*, give parameters to relationships. They offer a vision of both what must not be done to avoid damage to the community and what should be done to strengthen community.

5 Monotheism

Coming to understand monotheism was a process. At this point, the people believed that there were other deities at work in, with, and for other peoples. Gradually, Israel began to see that there is only one divinity at work in, with, and for *all* people.

6 Idols

In the Bible, an idol is anything that is not God that we elevate to the position of God and serve as if it were God.

Pause and Reflect: When you think of God as Deliverer, how does that strike you personally? In what ways do you experience bondage today? Are there people in your community for whom true freedom is illusive?

God will be our God. If we want that to be, God must also be our One and our Only. The words “you shall have no other gods before me” make that abundantly clear.⁵ The Hebrew here is difficult to translate. The words *al panay* can mean “before me (in front of my face),” “alongside me,” “in my place,” “instead of me,” or “against my face in some kind of hostile battle for allegiance.” I paraphrase it this way: “I am yours. I am yours alone. Don’t wave your other loves in my face.” The call to fidelity in our love and respect for God is at the heart of any deep understanding of Covenant relationship and the First Word.

Pause and Reflect: In what ways do you put other things before God?

The Second Word: No Idols

In Reformed theological history, Exodus 20:4 is understood to begin the Second Word. No idols. No images. Or else.

Many find the language of Exodus 20:4–6 troubling and confusing. If God is love, and the Ten Words are an invitation into a deeper love story with God, why is there so much jealousy and punishment? Could the great God of the universe somehow feel threatened by our other loves? That is hard to believe. Yet we know that replacing God with anything else has profound ramifications for human life. When we become confused about whom we follow and where our ultimate allegiance lies, we make decisions that damage us and the world in which we live. The language about punishment acknowledges that there are generational implications to human sin. This is not God’s desire out of some kind of pique. God calls us to remember the truth that human freedom can be misused. God recognizes that, by our moral choices, human beings set in motion consequences that fall on others.

In these verses, rather than God visiting punishment on children because of parents’ failures of faithfulness, those consequences only come to children who *continue* in their rejection of God and God’s loving invitation. Even then, grace triumphs. The consequences of faithlessness may last a few generations, but steadfast love lasts to the thousandth generation and beyond.

In other words, our choices have implications far beyond our own little worlds.

The issue addressed in the Second Word is idolatry, the human tendency to try to replace God with something else.⁶ God wants us to remember that life comes from only one source. When we place our trust in other allegiances and allow them to make our choices for us, we are in danger of idolatry.

The Second Word calls us to remember that we can meet God and learn to know God, but never fully grasp all of who God is. Every image we have of God is only partial. Early on, the Reformed tradition considered this Word to be the prohibition against making physical images of God. In Europe, during the Reformation, great old churches, with their frescoes and statues, were whitewashed as a way to comply with

this command. While most no longer feel that great art is idolatrous, we must be careful not to try to contain God in our own thoughts and understandings.

Pause and Reflect: With what images of God did you grow up? A sweet old man in the sky? A hard-to-please parent? God will be revealed in, and in whom, God chooses. How does Jesus' incarnation inform the way we think of God's image?

Jesus and the Word: Matthew 22:34–37

Jesus is in trouble with the Scribes and Pharisees. The Scribes and Pharisees are good religious people who are afraid of the new perspectives Jesus brings and the implications for the power structures that could arise from these changes. Jesus is too radical for them. These opponents look for ways to discredit him and stop the trajectory of his movement before too much damage is done.

It was common in Jesus' day for faithful Jews to debate about interpretation of the Law. The Pharisees believed that the Law should be expanded to cover all possibilities in life. Others, particularly the followers of Rabbi Hillel, believed that the Law should be reduced to its fundamental principles. Once, when Rabbi Hillel was asked to state the whole of the Law while standing on one foot, he said, "What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Law. The rest is commentary."⁷

In this passage, Jesus picks up on this theme and turns it from a negative to a positive. He tells us that loving God obligates us to love our neighbor. Love God with all that you are and have. And love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Jesus begins by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4, a passage that is often called the Shema⁸ to remind us that our actions flow from the singularity of our love for God, from our adherence to the First Word. The Greek word for love used by Matthew in this passage is *agape*. There are many words for love in Greek. *Agape*, a word adopted, and in a sense redefined, by the early Christian community, refers to love in action. *Agape* is more than a feeling. It is a choice. It is something one does, not just something one feels. It is an unconditional organizing ethic. Jesus teaches us that our love for God results in a profound way of living that places the needs of our neighbor in the forefront of our thoughts and moral choices. In these words, Jesus summarizes the heart and implication of the Ten Words.

Pause and Reflect: In what ways do you struggle to put God first in your life and family? What other priorities do you use to make your decisions?

The Word for Today

In the First Word, we learn that God holds human existence together in love. The deep loneliness of the human condition can only be met finally in our God. God's oneness reminds us that life is not really scattered but, rather, is held together in a Divine unity that calls us into deep and personal relationship. It reminds us that God chooses us and calls us into a love story that is generational, and indeed, eternal.

Many modern evils are not covered directly in the Ten Words, nor are they even imagined. The Words do not directly address terrorism, nuclear war, climate change, or medical

⁷Hillel and Shammai

Hillel and Shammai were wise and prominent rabbis during the first century CE. Shammai tended to be stricter than Hillel and there was often lively debate between them. Both rabbis' teachings are included in the Talmud.

⁸The Shema

The Shema refers to the biblical phrase in Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God; the LORD is one." It is the central prayer in the Jewish prayer book and many Jews recite it at least twice a day to reinforce their faith in God and their belief that there is only one God.

9 The Golden Calf

In Exodus 32, we learn that while Moses was on the holy mountain with God, the people became frightened that he had been killed. Knowing that they needed something or someone to trust to lead them, Aaron had the people melt down their valuables and form a golden calf. When the people saw the calf, they declared it their god and vowed to follow it.

10 Language about God

For more, see *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* by Virginia Ramey Mollencott. First published in 1984, this book was re-released in 2014 by Wipf and Stock, Eugene, Oregon.

ethics. Yet, the transformation of life and priorities that comes from walking deliberately in these Words opens our eyes to see other moral issues in a holistic and holy way. The Words encourage us to ask questions of the choices we make. Does this choice or position demonstrate that God is my ultimate source, or have I leaned too heavily on other sources? Does this choice or priority reflect the love of God, or is there another agenda in play?

Cleaving to one God is not as easy as we would like to think. It may be simple for us to claim that there is only one God, but when faced with complex lives and choices, we often turn to lesser commitments to guide us. For example, on a Sunday morning we may be tempted to linger at home and make pancakes with the family rather than face the struggle to get everybody up and dressed and to church on time. We might say to ourselves, “Sunday is our only family day and family comes first.” While those special family times, or even just a cozy sleep-in on a rainy Sunday, are important, the issue to ponder is who and what is *most* important. This Word invites us to look with honesty at our motives and motivators. The First Word declares that God, and God alone, gets to set our priorities and hold our final allegiance.

Putting God first is easy when the choice is between God and something we don’t like or care about. It is hard when putting God first comes into conflict with our other loves. Those loves can be our families, our work, our bank balances, or even our points of view. It is not that God does not care about these things. Nor is it that these things do not deserve our time and attention. They are good things. But they make poor gods.

It is no easier to face ourselves in the mirror with the Second Word on our hearts than it is with the First. We may think that we do not make “golden calves”⁹ for ourselves, but we, too, are often looking for a God that sparkles, one that we can control and keep in place. We look for the quick fix to our desires or anxieties by choosing to put our trust in other things or people. We often concretize our opinions or interpretations to such an extent that challenging them leads to a violent reaction.

If you think that this is not true, think of the language about God with which you are comfortable and how you feel when other language is used. In the original languages of scripture, God is described with language in male and female genders as well as neuter genders. God is “He,” “She,” and “It” in the Bible. For example, in the Old Testament, God’s Spirit is in the feminine. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is in the neuter.¹⁰ If expansive language for God is used in the Bible, is God always a He? Maybe not, but images of God as male are deeply entrenched in many of our churches and habits. Language itself can be a potent idol. At the heart of the caution of the Second Word is the recognition that God can never be truly represented, much less contained, using languages or media with which we are comfortable. When we stick to the comfortable, we look for a God who agrees with us. There is a danger in literalizing language, even biblical language. When we do so, it is too easy to begin to worship our preferences and interpretations rather than the amazing mystery of God who reaches out in love but can never be completely known. (See 1 Cor. 13:12.)

The Words remind us that the life of God’s people is always relational, always communal, always with and for others. God’s outreach to us with the boundaries we need to live lives of joy and promise is not quaint and of another age. The Words are eternal. This is who God is and what God desires. “I am yours. Be mine. Don’t put me in a box.”

Pause and Reflect: What was most surprising or intriguing to you in this lesson? What is one idea you will take home with you?

Praying with the Word Together or Alone

Your study of the Ten Words can benefit from praying with the Words on your own and as a group. Breath prayer can be a rich way to do this. This kind of prayer uses a simple phrase that is repeated, silently or aloud, while breathing in and out. In the early days of our faith, the Psalms were often prayed or chanted in this way. To begin, pause for a moment and breathe deeply. Remember that the words for “breath” in both Greek and Hebrew are the same words for “spirit.” When you breathe in consciously, you breathe in the powerful presence of your loving God. When you breathe out, you release all that separates you from God, all the old and new hurts of life. You are releasing all of that into the graciousness of your intimate, loving God. Sit quietly for a few moments and just breathe. When you are ready, lift to your awareness these simple words from God for you: “I am yours. You are mine.” Stay with these words quietly for a few moments and then offer to God your own prayer of response.

If you enjoy journaling, or would like to try, you might create a special journal for this study. ⑪ You can include insights, quotes from scripture, drawings, or prayer lists from your circle or study group. I enjoy using brightly colored pens, attaching stickers or sometimes photographs to reinforce insights. Do whatever is helpful to you to make the material your own. At the end of each lesson you will be encouraged to add to your journal, if you choose to keep one, in specific ways as we go along.

You might get started in this way. In your journal, begin a love letter to God.

1. Write down any insights that have come to you from this lesson.
2. Share any struggles that you have with putting God first and with holding on to images that are too limiting.
3. Ask God to show you how you still live in bondage and to reinforce for you how God longs for you to live in such a way that your spirit can find itself, for that is true freedom from bondage.
4. If you are in a circle or study group, take a moment, as you close, to write the names of the women in your study group in your journal. Lift each one up to God, saying “She belongs to you and you to her.”
5. Close your time of journaling by expressing your love to God and asking for help or forgiveness, as needed.

Closing Prayer

Loving God, our One and Only, we thank you for loving us and desiring relationship with us. Thank you for this time to study your Words. Thank you for laughter, insights, and even for the confusion that we may have felt. Help us to go forward more deeply committed to putting you first. Reveal to us anything that we substitute for you and show us how to put you first in all things. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

⑪ Alternatives to Keeping a Spiritual Journal

Many people find it beneficial to record their thoughts and feelings in a journal or notebook. Not everybody finds this practice helpful or appealing. If you don’t, there are other ways that you can reflect on what you learn in this study:

- At the end of each lesson make a list of the big things you want to remember or a list of the one idea from each lesson that you decide to take home with you. Review your list along the way.
- Pick out a quote you want to remember. Copy the quote (calligraphy anyone?) and put it someplace you’ll see it every day. What is the power of seeing those words over and over?
- Think about the worst thing you see happening in today’s world—something you can’t bear, something you yearn to see changed, that a commandment speaks to. Name it. Write it down in big letters or print a picture of something that represents it for you in your mind’s eye. Post the words or picture of this thing; pray every time you see it. Pray, “Help! Help! Help! What can I do to help?”

WORDS OF LOVE: I AM YOUR GOD; YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHERS

The First and Second Words

Central Concept

When God says, “I am the LORD *your* God . . .” and “You shall not make for yourself an idol . . .,” God is inviting us to look only to God for our sense of worth, our power, and our most steadfast and true relationship. In Jesus Christ, we see this God, *our* God, most clearly revealed, and we hear with crystal clarity the call to love God, others, and self.

Come Together (10 minutes)

In the introduction, the author calls the Ten Commandments the “Ten Words” and refers to them as “a love letter from God.”

Ask participants: “Take a moment to think of some Bible verses (recollections, exact words not needed) that help you know God loves you. Then move around the room and offer someone your name and one recollection you have. After exchanging a verse/recollection with one person, move on to another and offer a different verse/recollection.” (Make sure to include participants who need to remain seated.)

Pray the opening prayer in unison.

Connect (10 minutes)

“Each of the Ten Words offers a salve, a healing balm, for a core wound in human experience” (from the introduction). Point to the list below and invite participants to choose and circle two to three “core wounds” with which they can most identify, or which most pique their curiosity. After a time of silence, ask them to watch particularly for the sessions in which their own core wounds will be explored.

First Word: Loneliness and sense of separation from God

Second Word: Sense of helplessness and fearful desire for a quick fix

Third Word: Trivializing God and attaching God’s name to desires or priorities that are not worthy

Fourth Word: Busyness that substitutes for holiness, and achievement that substitutes for identity

Fifth Word: Rootlessness, unforgiveness, and a disdain for life itself

Sixth Word: Selfishness, hate, and fear that lash out and seek to destroy both God’s people and the beloved community

Seventh Word: Superficial and exploitative relationships

Eighth Word: Taking the easy way to get what we want at the expense of others

Ninth Word: The betrayal and erosion of personal and institutional trust

Tenth Word: The human tendency toward greed and comparing ourselves negatively to others

Invite participants to read aloud the first and second words in unison from Exodus 20:1–6. Point out in the list above the core wounds today’s session addresses in its exploration of the first and second words. Invite the group, in quick, brief words or phrases, to name something that can cause feelings of loneliness, then something that can create a sense of helplessness.

Consider and Converse (20 minutes)

In the section “The First Word: I Am Yours,” the author summarizes the story of how the people of Israel find themselves in the wilderness receiving the Ten Words, and the effect the Words are intended to have. In groups of three or four, referring to pertinent parts of this section as needed, discuss each of these questions in order:

1. The author says the people of Israel had “. . . not yet learned what it means to be a priestly kingdom, that is, one that brings God to the world.” What might this mean and why might it be true for the Israelites in their situation?
2. “The people [of Israel] must learn what it means to live in freedom. There are things in the wilderness that must be worked *out* of them and other things that must be worked *into* them.” What do you hear the author suggesting must be worked out of the people of Israel? Worked into them?
3. “A startling aspect of this verse is the word *your*. God begins this new love story by saying ‘I belong to you.’ God declares Godself to Israel much as suitors did in generations past.” Why might it matter that God makes the first commitment, long before we are asked or have opportunity to commit to God? What does this say about God’s character and God’s approach to God’s people? What might this imply about the kind or depth of response God invites from us?

And then,

4. Recall that each of the Ten Words addresses a “core wound” in human experience. Ask “How do you see the First Word, ‘I am your God,’ addressing the core wound identified by the author, namely, loneliness and a sense of separation from God? Similarly, how do you see the Second Word, which warns against our tendency to replace God with something else, addressing the identified core wound—a sense of helplessness and fearful desire for a quick fix?”

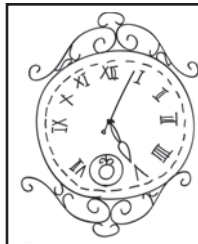
(These questions are intended to help participants review and reflect on the

lesson and to prepare for the whole group conversation. There is no need to hear reports on their conversations.)

Care and Commit (10 minutes)

As a follow-up to the small group discussion, invite responses from the whole group to your choice of these questions, as appropriate and timely for your situation. You may choose to review the author's "Pause and Reflect" questions in case you want to include one here.

1. Contemplate your own congregation. In what ways has it learned to be a priestly kingdom, bringing God to the world? What part do you play in this priestly role as a group? As an individual?
2. What might need to be worked out of your congregation/you in order to live in freedom? What might need to be worked into your congregation/you in order to live in freedom? Or, as the author refines that question, "... [W]hat must not be done to avoid damage to the community and what should be done to strengthen community?"
3. In her discussion of the second word, the author says, "The issue of the Second Word is idolatry, the human tendency to try to replace God with something else." As you look at society as a whole, what



Lesson One

Have 30 minutes or less with your group? Read aloud the "Central Concept" and the Word (commandment) for the day then use:

"Consider and Converse" or "Care and Commit."

- do you see replacing God in hearts and minds? In a moment of silence, think about what might be replacing God at times in your heart and mind? These thoughts are for your own perception and response.
4. Jesus has something to say about the response God asks of us if we choose to recognize that God is our God and love God in return (Matt. 22:34–37). Where does Jesus take us? Which is easier for you and why—loving God with all that you are or loving your neighbor as yourself? What are some of your challenges for either of these?

Commune and Close (10 minutes)

In the closing moments, direct participants to find a partner and to share with their partner their responses to one of these three questions:

1. God is *your* God. How do you live differently because you believe it,

or how might you live differently if you claimed this declaration from God?

2. If God is saying in the first word, "I am yours, and I am about your freedom," consider what freedoms God has given you, and what freedoms you might like to find in, or seek from, God. Name two or three.
3. "Jesus teaches us that our love for God results in a profound way of living that places the needs of our neighbor in the forefront of our thoughts and moral choices". What category of "neighbor" appears in your mental picture when you face up to the difficulty you have putting that neighbor in the forefront of your thoughts and moral choices? Why is that category so difficult for you? What change might you hope for?

Gather participants in a circle and read the closing prayer in unison.

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WORDS
OF LOVE:
DON'T
TRIVIALIZE
MY
NAME

Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain, Karolina Gacke

LESSON TWO

THE THIRD WORD

Scripture: Exodus 20:7 and Matthew 7:21–23

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses God's name (Ex. 20:7).

Purpose

The purpose of Lesson Two is to understand the power of God's name and our call to use it rightly.

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, our One and Only, we are grateful for all of the gifts of this day. Your beauty and kindness fill our fragile hearts with joy and peace. Help us today to dive deeply into your Word and your ways. Help us to celebrate our life with you and with each other. In this time together, we offer ourselves to you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Opening the Envelope

The Third Word is not about cussing! This Word is about how we use God's name. In the Bible, naming reveals a person's character and carries enormous power. In this lesson, we explore the concept of biblical naming and God's call to us to use God's name rightly and humbly. Once we have accepted the truth that God is our One and Only, and that nothing or no one else can substitute for God, we move to consider how the way we talk about God reflects the truth of our relationship with God. **The Third Word addresses the human wounds of trivializing God and attaching God's name to desires or priorities that are not worthy.** We learn in this Word that God is not to be used as a casual fixer of our anxiety or insecurity. Nor is God's name to be used as a tool to gain power or advantage. Rather, God offers remarkable intimacy and partnership in sharing God's name so that we can, together, accomplish God's loving will in the world. ❶

The Third Word

Early in my ministry I had a colleague who worked in the mailroom of our building. We exchanged pleasantries in the mornings when I passed her window on the way to my office on the third floor. When we first met, she was always open and kind. I looked forward to greeting her each morning. Gradually, over the years, she began to change.

❶ Praying without Ceasing

Even though the Third Word cautions us not to use God's name lightly or selfishly, it is not in contradiction with Paul's instruction to pray without ceasing (see 1 Thess. 5:17). It is always appropriate to bring our hearts and souls to God for our needs, the needs of friends and family, and the needs of the world itself. This word cautions us to watch for the human tendency to try to use God's power in inappropriate or selfish ways and thereby make God our servant, rather than the other way around.

The light faded in her. She became distant and small. One day, I noticed that the light I had noticed before was back in her and I asked her what had happened. “I legally changed my name,” she reported with a smile. “Oh?” I responded. “Yes,” she said. “My first name is now Martha and my last name is now Caroline” (name changed for privacy.) “That’s interesting,” I remarked. “Yes!” she said. “I was abused by my father from the cradle and my husband from the age of 18. I am done with wearing men’s names.” “Why did you choose Caroline for your last name?” I asked. “That was my grandmother’s name. She taught me all I have ever known about love. She is who I want to be, so every time I write or say my new name, I remember all that was good about her and try to live up to it.”

Legally changing our names may seem extreme to some of us. Still, what Martha realized and God knew is that names matter. Names have power to shape reality and, in some senses, to control it as well. I learned this early. When I was a child, I was seriously ill and often in and out of hospitals. Once, when I was about five, I had an episode that was life-threatening. My parents often told me of the day the doctors came out of the old green hospital room, refused to make eye contact, and just shook their heads as my parents stood quaking in the hallway. It was springtime and my parents went outside for a breath of air. Standing by the blooming white azaleas, they cried and prayed that God would spare their little girl. I did survive, obviously. Shortly after that, my mother took me to town to shop for a new dress. I grew up in a small southern town with one main street and a handful of shops. Still, going to town was a big deal. Women dressed up. I remember I had a puffy skirt, socks with ric rac trim around the cuffs, and black Capezio shoes with yellow daisies on the toes. As Mama and I walked down the street, a friend of hers spotted us, ran across the street and crouched down eye level with me. She pinched my cheeks and said with passionate earnestness, “Genie, you are just a little miracle!” And I believed her! For years into my adulthood I believed, only barely consciously, that this was my job. I was to be “the miracle,” to fix every broken thing, every situation of injustice, every faltering church. I wore that name, “Little Miracle,” like an exact imprint of my DNA. I had been *named* it, so I had to *be* it.

Pause and Reflect: Perhaps you have had a pet name or nickname with which you came to identify. What did that name mean to you? Can you think of names that you have received that caused you pain? How have your names shaped your identity?

Many of us learn that names matter when our parents or guardians tell us to be careful of our behavior so that we don’t besmirch the family name. I had a parishioner once who told of her mother sending her off to school each morning with the words, “Remember who you are!” While that charge could certainly feel onerous to some of us, it gave her a feeling of security and confidence. She was part of a family that had values and traditions she cherished, and she carried them with her into her world by bearing her name. Those of us who were a part of non-traditional families, or who were adopted and chosen into a family name, may be able to relate to trying to live up to our names (or to trying to live them down). It can even be disorienting for some women who change their names when they marry. In the movie *Shirley Valentine*, the protagonist ponders, “What happened to the girl that used to be me?” Names matter.

They shape us.

In scripture, names play a critical role. Each name was chosen carefully. It was believed that a well-chosen name would imprint the character of the name on a person's whole life. For example, it is interesting to me that there are so many Marys in the Bible. The Hebrew name we translate as Mary is *Miryam*. It means "rebellion," and many of the Marys we meet in the Bible do indeed break out of the narrowly defined roles set for them by their culture. Mary of Bethany sits with Jesus' male disciples to learn at Jesus' feet (Luke 10). Mary of Magdala becomes part of the inner circle of disciples and is the first one to whom the message of resurrection is entrusted (John 20). Mary, Jesus' mother, becomes the vessel that brings God to the world (Luke 1–2).

When life-changing events happen to biblical characters, God often changes their names to reflect that they are now different people. Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 17). Simon becomes Peter (John 21). Saul becomes Paul (Acts 9). Sometimes, people change their own names when their lives change. When Naomi loses her husband and sons, she changes her name to *Mara* (Ruth 1), which means "bitterness." Names are more than syllables by which we are sorted one from the other. Names give deep identity and have the power to shape future actions.

In biblical times, to offer one's name to another was to give that person a special glimpse into one's own nature, identity, and values. To share the name, especially a pet name, was a sign of intimacy. It also gave the one with whom the name was shared a measure of power over the other. Our ancestors believed that to know a person's name made that person in some ways vulnerable to the other. To give one's name was to say, "I share all of who I am with you. I trust that you will not hurt me, because now I know that you can."

To be invited to speak God's name (or to refrain from doing so) reflects God's trusting desire that we understand God's nature and power in certain ways. To speak a name is to activate the power of that name. To speak God's name draws us up into a deep intimacy that is sacred. When we do that, we speak for and as God in much the same way that ambassadors speak for and as the countries they represent.

There are two creation stories in the book of Genesis. In the second story, in Genesis 2, we see this understanding of the power and responsibility of naming at work. In this passage, God gives the human being (Adam) the authority to name all of the other creatures. With that authority comes the power to shape their destiny and the responsibility for their well-being.

When God addressed Moses from the burning bush and sent him on his mission of rescue for God's enslaved people (Ex. 3), Moses knew that he would need God's own power to be able to accept the call to return to Egypt and set the Hebrew people free. He knew that to go back to those he had fled, to face the reality of the murder he had committed, to claim the healing power that going back can sometimes offer, was going to demand more of him than he thought he could muster. So, at that burning bush, Moses asked for God's name, not in order to be sure with whom he was dealing, but in order to have access to God's power for the work ahead.

2 The Divine Tetragrammaton

The Hebrew language does not have vowel letters. Vowel sounds are indicated by a series of small marks called pointings. These marks are added so that people will know how to pronounce words and how to distinguish between words with the same sets of consonants. Think *bd*. What is that word? *Bed? Bid? Bad? Bud?* The pointings would tell you. God's name in the Bible is the four letters *YHWH*. You will sometimes see it written as it was pronounced with the pointings, "Yahweh."

3 Words for God

The Hebrew scriptures use three different words for God. *El* is usually simply translated as "God" or "god," depending on the one being referenced. *Elohim* (plural) is translated as "God" or "gods." (The text often uses this word to refer to the gods of other people.) *YHWH*, in most English Bible versions, is translated as "LORD God," to avoid it being spoken aloud. One clue to where the divine name appears in the English text is to look for the phrase "LORD God" and notice whether the word *LORD* is in a different font or in small capital letters. You will see this clearly in the *NRSV*. The use of "LORD" spelled with small capital letters is your clue that the divine name is used in the original Hebrew text.

In that encounter, God revealed God's name, *YHWH*, in Hebrew.² This word that is difficult to translate actually seems to be a verb. It means something like "I am who I am," or "I will be who I will be." When God is asked to give God's identity, God chooses an action word, the word for "being." God's name is beyond our comprehension, as is the totality of God's being. Still, God gives us God's name in hopeful intimate relationship.

In Exodus 6:2–8, God addresses Moses further, encouraging him and reinforcing God's very nature that is carried in the divine name. In these verses we begin to see that the name of God is not just "Being." It is also "Being with." Of course, for Christians, God's very nature of "Being with" is made full and explicit in the incarnation of Jesus, *Emmanuel*, "God with us." In this Word, it is the name *YHWH*, the essence of who God is, that God asks us not to misuse.

God's name is holy. For this reason, faithful Jews from earliest days refused to speak it aloud, feeling that even the speaking of it somehow profaned the name and tarnished its holiness. God's name was a word too precious to speak. So, the words *Adonai*, or "the LORD," or "the Name" were and are substituted.³ Even today, to preserve the holiness of the Name, many people do not write out the word *God*, but choose to substitute *G_d* instead. The Hebrew people have understood the revelation of God and, in some senses, the very knowledge of God to be rooted in the gift of the name. Such a gift implies that God's people will not only use the name rightly but will also live holy lives worthy of the Name.⁴

The Third Word warns against endangering our relationship with God by attaching God's name to things that are contrary to God's values, irrelevant to the big picture, or simply a matter of personal preference. For example, it is a violation of the name to assume that God hates all the people and things that we hate, and, conversely, to arrogantly assume that God is in favor of all the people and causes we ourselves admire. Such assumptions trivialize God's name. To claim God's name and blessing on actions that are far from the heart of God is a powerful misuse of the name and can produce dire consequences that include growing spiritual blindness, confused witness, and unrecognized hypocrisy, at the very least.

Pause and Reflect: What are examples of times when God's name was attached to actions that were inconsistent with God's values? How do we know when it is appropriate to apply God's name to a decision or position?

Now that we understand the power of the Name, what exactly does it mean to "make wrongful use of the name" (*NRSV*), "take the name of the LORD thy God in vain" (*KJV*), "use the LORD your God's name as if it were of no significance" (*CEB*), or "misuse the name of the LORD your God" (*TNIV*)? We can see room for scholarly debate about the meaning of this Word even from a quick look at several different English translations of Exodus 20:7. At the root of these differences is the Hebrew word *lassaw*, which means "false, lying, deceptive, or deceitful." It also means "useless, vain, petty, pointless, and ineffective." From *lassaw*, we learn that we are not to use God's name in a deceptive, petty, or trivial way.

In ancient Israel, this Word addressed people's basic integrity and had to do with oath-taking. Patrick Miller, professor emeritus of Old Testament theology at Princeton Theological Seminary and author of The Interpretation Series' volume *The Ten Commandments*, counts at least 40 times in the Old Testament when oaths were made in God's name in order to give the words of the oath-maker greater weight.¹ God's name was used as a kind of grounding or as collateral for the words spoken. The issue, of course, is trustworthiness in speech. (We will see more of this in Lesson Eight, when we look at the Ninth Word.) The problem, of course, is that if we live in such a way that the words and promises we speak are not seen as valid or sure, no attaching of God's name to what we say will fix it. Doing so is a manipulation of God and others, and is a misuse of the Name.

Another nuance to consider is how the challenge of this Word is revealed in the book of Job. The book of Job does not simply focus on the mystery of why good people suffer. Rather, it focuses on what circumstances in life can cause a person to curse God, to misuse the Name, and to abandon faith. The issue that the book of Job raises is how we talk about God in a hurting world without trivializing God's name with platitudes and false advice like Job's friends do. It can be a challenge in times of great pain not to announce God as powerless or heartless and thereby misuse God's name. To offer vain comfort such as "It is God's will" or "We mustn't question God" in the presence of grief, tragedy, or oppression is to misuse the Name to the point of meaninglessness. To use God's name in a way that ultimately wounds us, or others, even if the intention is to comfort, is a vain and empty use of the name.

4 In Jesus' name.

After the incarnation, Christians further developed the understanding of the use of God's name. We often pray "in Jesus' name." If Jesus' name is not trivialized or manipulated in our praying, it can reflect a recognition that the efficacy of any prayer lies with Christ and not just in the power of our desires. Other times, praying "in Jesus' name" is just as problematic as speaking the name YHWH. If we attach "in Jesus' name" to prayers that are essentially selfish or inconsistent with God's nature and values, as if that phrase is somehow a stamp that makes everything we want suddenly consistent with God's will, that itself is a misuse of the name.

Pause and Reflect: How can we use God's name faithfully in the presence of evil or suffering? What is an experience that you have had in which you felt that your pain was trivialized by platitudes that used God's name? When one of my dearest friend's 16-year-old son was killed in an automobile accident, I heard someone say to her, "Be joyful. God just needed another angel." How might you have expressed your honest sentiments in a way that neither trivialized my friend's pain or God's name?

An additional issue for the Hebrew people was the right use of God's name in worship. The people realized that to use God's powerful name to bless something was a big responsibility that could not be taken lightly. While the Talmud encourages saying 100 blessings a day, the rabbis also caution against *berachah leuatalah*, the uttering of a vain or empty blessing.² Speaking God's name in worship proclaims intimacy, devotion, and identity. Therefore, it is considered a blatant misuse of the name to worship in a shallow, selfish, or trivial way.

Pause and Reflect: What are some ways that God's name is sometimes trivialized or misused in worship?

Jesus and the Word: Matthew 7:21–23

In Matthew 7, Jesus focuses on the specific damage that false prophets can do to the community and the general damage that a lack of understanding of God's deep values can do to the cause of God. In these verses, Jesus calls people who have used his name

without the kind of intimacy implied in that use evil. It is not that people with self-serving motives have necessarily done bad things. The problem is that they have done what they did, somehow, without doing the full will of God. They have not been transformed by their relationship with God to such an extent that they act on God's behalf and not their own. In other words, not everything that looks holy actually is and not everyone who claims to be acting for God is actually doing so.

Pause and Reflect: What criteria help you decide whether something is the full will of God? Have you ever thought you were doing the will of God, only to learn later that the action was not timely or helpful? What did you learn from that experience?

Throughout scripture, to take action in the name of another is to claim their approval and power for that action. In these verses, Jesus reminds us that to use God's name for our own purposes is downright evil. It is possible to profane our relationship with God in both speech and actions when we do not take the time for humble intimacy. When we don't listen for God's will for our lives, we can begin to think of God as little more than a larger and more powerful version of ourselves who likes what we like and wants what we want. Without a deep and abiding relationship with God that includes time for study, worship, prayer, and silent waiting on God, we can easily miss both our life's calling and the nudges from God that point out that we are headed in the wrong direction.

When we read *kingdom of heaven* in Matthew 7:21, it is helpful to understand that the term is synonymous with the term *kingdom of God* used in other parts of the New Testament. Matthew, out of reverence for the Name, substitutes the word *heaven* for the word *God*. This heaven is not the heaven of the afterlife. Rather, Jesus refers to that state of being in which we are ruled by God and God's values alone. Jesus teaches here not about people misusing the Name and going to hell, but about people misusing the Name by failing to be ruled by God, and the dire consequences that this misuse brings upon them and the community. The Name must be tied to God's agenda or it is being misused.

The Word for Today

There is a tendency, in even the most faithful people, to use God's name to bolster our arguments, opinions, and even our unexamined prejudices. For many years, people claimed God's name in order to cling to slavery, bigotry, misogyny, homophobia, and more. An understanding that God's name is holy draws us into a relationship in which we learn not to attach God's name to things that God abhors. We realize that not everything we can do is something that we should do, nor is everything we want actually God's will.

When we learn to revere our relationship with God and keep God's name holy, our anxieties can be calmed, and we can gain an understanding of God's perspective on issues about which we have made erroneous or incomplete assumptions. Once we understand the Third Word, it becomes both more humbling and more powerful to claim that we act in God's name in our homes and in our communities.

Pause and Reflect: What are some of the ways that we trivialize or misuse God's name in our daily lives?

I like to translate the Third Word as “Do not trivialize or make mischief with my name.” Mischief, for me, carries the sense of casually causing damage. Making mischief with God's name is about more than simply cursing or saying, “I swear to God,” or “OMG!” These curses are real misuses and should be avoided. But, the heart of this Word is subtler than that. We make mischief with God's name when we attach it to lies or to priorities designed to get us something rather than to further God's will. We misuse the name when we attach it to insincere or unworthy prayers such as, “Dear God, please make my team win.” We horrifyingly misuse God's name when we apply it to prejudices of our own in order to legitimize our own positions. We make mischief with God's name when we use it to give trivial answers to deep questions.

We trivialize the name when we assume that God is obligated to bless that which makes us happy or comfortable. We also misuse the name when we make God so amorphous as to become nothing at all. If, for example, we think of God as simply the universe then we have done the opposite of creating an idol in which we try to nail God down into a specific image we can control. This mischief spreads God out like smoke in which God is everything and therefore not much of anything.

We trivialize the name when we use it as a weapon to stop conversation or to convince, coerce, or manipulate others into doing what we want them to do. We make mischief when we think that we can influence God to do things our way by adding “in Jesus' name” to our prayers. Encouraged to ask for what we want and need, we attach God's name to our prayers as a sort of magic seal, rather than humbly offering our needs to God for God to sort out the good. This is a subtle misuse of the Name. 5

When we trivialize our relationship with God by assuming that the rules don't apply to us, that worship is one option among many, that it matters if our team wins, or that our candidate is the only Godly one, we have violated the heart and spirit of the Third Word. When we compartmentalize faith and make it only for Sundays or for table graces and keep silent in the presence of injustice and call ourselves Christian, we trivialize the Name. When we deny the Lordship of God in any aspect of our lives, we make mischief with the Name.

God says this: “Don't use me as a means and not an end. Don't use the gift of intimate relationship with me to try to get what you want or to seem honest when you are not.” In this Word, God asks us to want God, not just God's power and what we think God can do for us. For our love story with God to deepen, we are not to use the name for any purpose that is extraneous to God's nature, purpose, and will. When we claim to act for God without sufficient grounding in deep personal relationship with God, and without sufficient clarity about God's values and nature, we make profound mischief with the name.

The first three Words of the Ten Commandments form a unit that describes our relationship with God. In the First Word, God is ours and is all about our freedom.

5 Try Praying This Way

Simple prayers that honor God's name can begin to break us of the habit of trivializing the name. “Thank you, God.” “Help me, God.” “Heal us, God.” “Use us, God.” “Lead us, God.” Prayers such as these deeply honor the Name by opening our lives to God's leading and power; they do not attempt to direct how God should answer them.

In the Second Word, God will brook no rivals and will not be contained in any image, idea, or language that we might create. And in the Third Word, God, after offering us a glimpse into who God really is, asks us not to trivialize, misuse, or sully God's name by attaching it to desires and priorities that are really just our own.

Pause and Reflect: What was most surprising or intriguing to you about this lesson? What is one thing you will take home with you from your study of this Word?

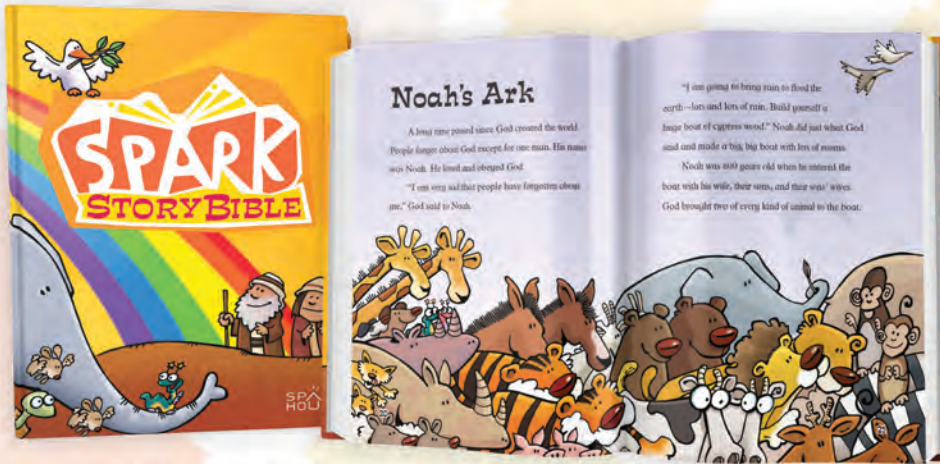
Praying with the Word Together or Alone

Take a moment to draw a large circle in your journal. Add to the circle the names that honor God. For example, in scripture we find the names “Wonderful Counselor,” “Mighty God,” “Everlasting Father,” “Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6), “Good Shepherd” (John 10), “Holy One” (Isa. 30:12), and more. Other names from your own experience are appropriate, too. Consider the special gift of insight into the character of God that each name gives to you. Offer your humble gratitude for these insights. Sit calmly for a moment and breathe deeply. Let yourself empty a bit until you feel a free and peaceful space inside you, even for a moment. Rest there. When you are ready, introduce, silently, the divine name that God offered to Moses from the burning bush, “I AM WHO I AM,” into your prayer. Repeat the name softly for a few moments as if God is speaking God's name to you. Let the nature and presence of God envelop you. In the love letter you are writing to God jot down any insights or feelings you want to remember.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, God of love and bounty, God of nearness and peace, we thank you for the intimacy and power of your name. Help us to love you deeply and use your name honorably so that your glory may shine forth in our lives and world. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

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WORDS OF LOVE: DON'T TRIVIALIZE MY NAME

The Third Word

Central Concept

The author says that the way we talk about God reveals the truth of our relationship with God. The Third Word calls us to use God's name in ways that honor God's holiness, justice, and steadfast love for all. Exploring the importance of a name and misuses of God's name can help us identify ways we can more truly represent to the world, in our speech and in our action, who God is and whose we are.



Preparation for leader: On poster board, draw and cut out a large circle. Cut it into three equal pieces.

Come Together (10 minutes)

Divide the whole group into three smaller groups. Assign each group a gathering table, one piece of the poster circle, some markers, and a name: Group 1—"I am your God"; Group 2—"Place nothing over God"; Group 3—"Don't trivialize God's name." Set up this activity by saying, "Our study author states that the first three Words—the two in the first lesson and the one in today's lesson—form a unit describing our relationship with God. You have five minutes to prepare to state what your group's name means, and say clearly and briefly what your group contributes to humanity's relationship with God. You are advocates and cheerleaders for its importance to this relationship. On your poster piece, write your group name, surrounded by words or symbols that describe and interpret it."

After five minutes, invite each group, in number order, to briefly name and advocate for their role using their poster as a prop, then tape their poster on a wall or easel that you designate, so the three posters form a circle. You might use this quote to highlight the significance of the circle they have created to represent the

picture of God that the first three Words create: "The circle was considered by the ancient Greeks to be the perfect shape—eternal, without beginning or end, a perfectly balanced whole. A single circle is, therefore, a symbol of the divine, or eternity, while the number one expresses the unity of God."²

Pray the Opening Prayer in unison.

Connect (5 minutes)

Invite participants to read aloud the third Word in unison from Exodus 20:7.

Point out that today's session on the third Word addresses the core wound "trivializing God and attaching God's name to desires or priorities that are not worthy." Ask participants to name, in brief words or phrases, some ways they see or hear God trivialized in society; in language; in their own thoughts or speech.

Consider and Converse

(Activity One—15 minutes; Activity Two—20 minutes)

Activity One: Explain that the author describes the importance of names and naming, and the hurt caused by misusing names. Examine her ideas by leading this exploration of how names and use of names matter. Ask participants to face each other in two lines. (If you have an odd number, you as leader can join in.) Read the first statement and allow 30 seconds per person to talk with the person opposite. Call time after one minute; ask one line to move one person to their right while the other line stays in place. (If you have folks with mobility challenges, make sure they are in the line that never moves. If needed, participants can sit in a chair or wheelchair in this line.) After the line moves, *the person at the front of the moving line goes to the other end of the line and joins*

a new partner for the next statement. If there might be group members who do not know each other, make sure all exchange names before responding to the statement.

1. I think I was named _____ because . . .
2. My name means _____, which suits (or doesn't suit) me because . . .
3. If I were to pick an adjective to go with my name that describes something important about me it would be _____ because . . .
4. A hurtful name I have been called is _____, and it hurt because . . .
5. Knowing someone's name matters because that means . . .
6. Some names I like to use for God are _____ because . . .
7. The name God used for God, when speaking to Moses, means "I am who I am," which is an action word, a verb. That tells me God is . . .
8. I dislike hearing people use God's name, or the name of Jesus Christ, to _____ because . . .
9. I think it is possible that God abhors having God's name attached to hatred of _____ because . . .
10. One way I may have misused, or am misusing, God's name is . . .

Activity Two: Explain that in "The Word for Today," the author offers her translation of the third Word—"Do not trivialize or make mischief with God's Name." She then offers many examples of ways we do this. Find this list of examples below. The directions of what to do are included at the end of the list. Divide the list among pairs or groups of three and tell participants you will ask them to tell the whole group their ideas.

In the whole group, hear the ideas created by participants in order of the list.

Care and Commit (5 minutes)

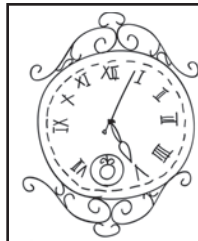
Invite participants, in silence, to review the list and put a check mark by ones they sometimes notice in themselves. Prompted by the ideas offered by the small groups, have them ponder their desire to change. Say, "If you are willing, make a note of a way to watch for and guard against misuse of God's name in your life. If you would like to tell it to someone and affirm your commitment, look up when you are ready, catch the eye of another wanting to do so, and join them for a quiet brief conversation."

Commune and Close (5 minutes)

Come together in a circle. Read aloud Exodus 20:7 and Matthew 7:21. Then pray the closing prayer in unison and follow it by passing the peace of Christ. "The peace of Christ be with you." "And also with you."

We trivialize or make mischief (casually cause damage) with God's name when we

- 1. attach God's name to lies or to priorities designed to get us something rather than further God's will;
- 2. attach God's name to insincere or unworthy prayers;



Lesson Two

Have 30 minutes or less with your group? Read aloud the "Central Concept" and the Word (commandment) for the day then use:

"Consider and Converse," Activity Two, followed by "Care and Commit."

- 3. apply God's name to prejudices of our own in order to legitimize our own positions;
- 4. use God's name to give trivial answers to deep questions;
- 5. assume that God is obligated to bless that which makes us happy or comfortable;
- 6. make God's name so amorphous as to become nothing at all;
- 7. use God's name as a weapon to stop conversation or to convince, coerce, or manipulate others into doing what we want them to do;
- 8. think we can influence God to do things our way by simply adding 'In Jesus' name' to our prayers;
- 9. assume the rules don't apply to us, worship is one option among many, . . . and our candidate is the only Godly one;
- 10. compartmentalize faith and make it only for Sundays or table graces and then keep silent in the presence of injustice and call ourselves Christian;
- 11. deny the Lordship of God in any aspect of our lives;
- 12. claim to act for God without sufficient grounding in deep personal relationship with God, and without sufficient clarity about God's values and nature.

Say, "For each of the misuses assigned to you, name a positive use of God's name, or a practice you might use to check yourself against such a misuse. Be prepared to tell the whole group your ideas."

Note

* Richard Taylor, *How to Read a Church: A Guide to Symbols and Images in Churches and Cathedrals* (Mahawh, NJ : HiddenSpring, 2005), 13.



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Day of Rest, Ethel V. Ashton

WORDS OF LOVE:
KEEP SABBATH



LESSON THREE

THE FOURTH WORD

Scripture: Exodus 20:8–11; Deuteronomy 5:12–15; Mark 2:23–28

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it (Ex. 20:8–11).

Purpose

The purpose of Lesson Three is to understand the gift of Sabbath and to recover a sense of the sacred urgency of Sabbath-keeping for human life and the created order.

Opening Prayer

As we study Sabbath together, let's begin this lesson by lighting Sabbath candles and praying the traditional prayer for welcoming Sabbath. You can use a candlestick, or, if you have one, a small candelabrum such as might be used on a dining table for a special meal. Light the candles while you pray: "Blessed are you, LORD, our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with the commandments and commanded us to light the Sabbath candle[s]." If you would like to try it in Hebrew, here are the words transliterated: *Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Shabbat.*

Opening the Envelope

In the first three Words, God invites us into loving, exclusive, freedom-giving, and respectful relationship. The language in those Words is personal and intimate, addressing us as individuals even while we are also part of a community of faith. Words Five through Ten focus on our life together in community. The Fourth Word serves as a link between our personal intimacy and our community responsibility. In this lesson, we will explore the history and meaning of Sabbath as a day of radical reorientation of life and priorities in which all people are equal and a day when we commit ourselves to relationship with God and the reorganization of life that this entails. **This Word addresses the wound of busyness that substitutes for holiness and achievement that substitutes for identity.**

① The Counting of Days

Our biblical ancestors counted days as beginning at sunset. Each new day began with rest and renewal that equipped one for the work of the daylight hours.

The Fourth Word: Remember the Sabbath Day, and Keep It Holy (Exodus 20:8)

It was the spring of 1977. I had graduated the previous summer from the University of Alabama with an imminently marketable degree in creative writing. I was working as a waitress at Joe Namath's restaurant in Tuscaloosa and was living (at the age of 22) in a retirement home for Alabama teachers. While I waited tables during the day and wrote poetry late into the night, watching the lights of the barges on the Black Warrior River, God called me to ministry. God's call was a shock to me, but nothing like I thought it would be to my parents.

When I told my mother (neither of us having ever seen a woman minister), she was intrigued—nervous, but intrigued. I began my call process in the Episcopal Church that my mother and I attended after the small Presbyterian church in which I was raised left the denomination during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. It was during seminary that I came home to the Presbyterian family, to the church of my childhood, the church of my baptism.

Years after that first conversation with my mother, I remember the long drive home from the little Episcopal seminary in the Tennessee hills to tell my family that I was convinced that God was calling me to be a Presbyterian minister and not an Episcopal priest. I didn't know what to expect. When I told my Baptist father and Episcopalian mother the news, Daddy took it like a champ—Episcopalian, Presbyterian, all the same to him. My mother was dashed. All she could think of were those summers growing up in central Florida, the child of Scottish immigrants, sitting with her Calvinist mother on the front porch on Sundays, watching the neighborhood children run in their bathing suits to swim in the lake as she sat with her book of Psalms in her hand. Was my life to be one long, brutal, Calvinist Sabbath of self-denial? She went into her room and wept.

Is that really what Sabbath is to be? Long, brutal, self-denying, and joyless? Let's explore!

For many of us raised in church, the word Sabbath probably refers to the day we gather together for worship. It is not, however, just a churchy word for Sunday. In the scriptures, Sabbath is a part of the very fabric of life. The concept is rooted in the creation story (Gen. 1) in which God, after that wild frenzy of creativity that set the world in motion, spends the seventh day resting.

Sabbath in the Jewish tradition begins at sunset on Friday and ends at sunset on Saturday. ① Jesus and all his early followers were faithful Jews who celebrated Sabbath during those hours. Sabbath does not refer to a particular day of the week, however. Nor does it refer only to a time of rest or a day for worship. It is, rather, a particular consciousness, a way of being ruled by God's love, values, and sovereign provision.

It is impossible to overestimate the importance and distinctiveness of Sabbath for our ancestors. In the Bible, all of life revolves around Sabbath. The days of the week are counted as "Six Days until Sabbath," "Five Days until Sabbath," and so forth. All week long, people prepare for the coming Sabbath. Food is readied and set aside. Clothes are

cleaned and laid out. Tables and meals are planned. Even the most impoverished Jew in Jesus' day chose to set aside a tiny bit of food or money so that Sabbath could be more abundant.

In Jewish homes the celebration begins with family worship, special prayers, and lighting candles. Sabbath observance includes worship together in the synagogue, either before or after the home rituals. Special foods and clothing set Sabbath apart from all other days. ❷ While it can never be separated from worship, even worship itself cannot contain the beauty of Sabbath. Sabbath is bigger and more holy than the human heart and mind can fully comprehend. ❸

Pause and Reflect: How was Sabbath observed, or not, when you were young?

What exactly is Sabbath and why is it important? Sabbath, “to stop” or “to cease,” is a part of the fabric of creation. It is not recreation or even rest as we think of it today, but rather, a radical, weekly practice of the reorganization of life and priorities toward God and in the presence of God.

The Fourth Word serves as a hinge in the text of the Ten Commandments. The first three Words have to do with our intimate relationship with God directly and personally, and the final six Words have to do with how we live out our distinctive calling together as the beloved community. The Fourth Word is both of those things. It is about our relationship with God personally and it is about our relationship with God lived out in community. With Sabbath, we experience our selves as God's beloved while simultaneously experiencing how Sabbath holds us together as God's people. It is in this Word that intimacy with God meets intimacy in community. Sabbath is not just for you. It is for us.

Sabbath is a special time of connecting with the sacred as a way of being truly alive. Sabbath is about celebration and not denial. The reformer John Calvin introduced the notion of denial into Sabbath observance, not for its own sake, but in order to create space for deep encounter and for the transformation of life and attitudes that Sabbath can bring. The ancient rabbis believed so deeply in the transformative quality of Sabbath that they taught that if all the people of Israel would keep two perfect Sabbaths, the Messiah would come. Sabbath practice is about orienting life away from self-sufficiency and achievement and toward a quiet rest in the power and provision of God.

The versions of the Fourth Word in Exodus and Deuteronomy offer us profound differences to ponder. In Exodus, we are commanded to “remember” (*zachor*) the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Remembering invites us to go back over the story of God's creative activity in the spinning of the world and in our own lives. In Exodus, the whole of the Sabbath calling is rooted in creation and celebration of the gift of life itself. We remember and live Sabbath as a way of imitating and modeling our lives on the way that God does things rhythmically, mindfully—creating, resting, and creating some more.

Refraining from work is not solely for rest. It is also for focus. It is perfectly possible to cease working, to cease ordinary activity, and to rest, but to do so with no acknowledgment or redirection of life toward God whatsoever. That reduces Sabbath to a kind of

❷ Bake Challah

At the end of this lesson (see p. 45), I've included a recipe for the traditional Sabbath bread. You might bake a loaf, or pick up a loaf at a bakery, and share this bread with others. Challah is especially tasty served warm with fresh butter and sweet jam.

❸ Sabbath and Sunday

In the early years after Jesus' resurrection, followers of Jesus kept both the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week and the Lord's Day (commemorating the resurrection) on the first day, as sacred duties. Gradually these two days melded into one, blending the rituals and requirements of Sabbath with the celebration of the empty tomb. Whether celebrated on the seventh day or on the first, Christians have maintained that Sabbath worship is fundamental to the life of faith and is itself a carrier of the sacred. Even as our understanding of how God's special day was to be honored began to shift and diverge, the recognition that rest and reorganization of priorities and values was central to life and worship remained. Worship together changes us, and it can change the world. While Protestant Christians would certainly agree that one can worship God anywhere, we also know that we often don't, and even if we do, it is not the same as worshipping together in the church.

God-sanctioned “R and R.” But in “remembering” Sabbath, we pause profoundly in order to put everything in its proper order and perspective. Sabbath is, as biblical scholar Abraham Heschel says, a sanctuary or palace in which we keep alive the memory of creation and redemption.¹ On Sabbath, God invites us to remember that we are not in charge of the universe. One day per week, regularly and without fail, we are to stop behaving as if we are.

Pause and Reflect: How does Sabbath as we’re discussing it in this lesson fit with your understanding of Sabbath? In what circumstances do you “just stop”?

In the Deuteronomy text, the word *remember* (from Exodus) is replaced with the word *observe* or *keep* (*shamor*). This word means “to guard from harm or violation.” Keeping Sabbath is also, then, about protecting that which is most sacred, and ensuring that what God intends for God’s people (and the whole created order) is not lost. Sabbath is “kept” in the context of contemplating the call to justice and God’s intention for the people’s freedom. Sabbath in this context is a time to remember slavery in Egypt and to gather strength to fight against it happening again.

“Keeping” Sabbath, however, is about more than rest and gathering strength for the on-going struggles for justice in the world. It is also a physical declaration of the radical inclusivity and equality that is at the heart of God’s will for the created order. On Sabbath, no one works, so all are equal. Free people, men, women, slaves, and animals all stand as equally valuable on Sabbath. No job is more important than another. All are one in the provision of God. On Sabbath, life is not about what we do. It is about what God provides. In that sense, Sabbath “keeping” is an act of community protest or resistance against any type of enslavement. Keeping Sabbath is an act of solidarity with those who struggle most. Sabbath keeping recognizes that all are dependent on God for survival, and the illusion of self-sufficiency and control is just that, an illusion.

Sabbath remembering and keeping are inclusive and cosmic. The rest that is called for on Sabbath, the solidarity with all, extends to the whole of creation, indeed to the whole of the cosmos. The ancient rabbis said that on Sabbath even the air we breathe changes its character.

In both Exodus and Deuteronomy, God makes plain that Sabbath observance applies not only to the people of Israel. Sabbath is to be kept by aliens in the land, servants, and the land itself. Animals and strangers are to keep Sabbath, allowing them to refresh and live as God intends.

The Sabbath principle unfolds in the law (Ex. 20:22–23:33) to include sabbatical years that are to occur every seventh year. During this whole-earth sabbatical, the ground is to lie fallow and those who are poor can reap from years past. Slaves and indentured servants may be kept for six years but must be released on the seventh, debt-free. While the whole notion of slavery is so abhorrent to us as to be nearly impossible to examine, the heart of these laws is to declare that unrelenting labor cannot go on forever. Rest and release are woven into the very fabric of creation. Sabbath-keeping is creation-keeping.

Sabbath is the one day every week that we, as an act of choosing, live as if all the freedom and beauty that God longs for on the earth is already present. It is one day when we stop our wild striving enough for heaven to come to us. Heschel tells a Jewish rabbinic legend that gets to the heart of this Sabbath reality:²

At the time when God was giving the Torah to Israel, He said to them: My children! If you accept the Torah and observe my mitzvot [commandments], I will give you for all eternity a thing most precious that I have in my possession.

And what, asked Israel, is that precious thing which Thou wilt give us if we obey Thy Torah?

The world to come.

Show us in this world an example of the world to come.

The Sabbath is an example of the world to come.

Why is Sabbath an example of the world to come? Because in it, all are focused on God, rest is woven into the fabric, and all are equal before God.

Biblical scholar Irving Greenberg puts it this way: “By an act of will on Shabbat, we step outside the here and now and for approximately twenty-five hours all things are seen through the eyes of love, as if all was perfect.”³ Sabbath, practiced rightly, mindfully, and consistently gives us a glimpse of what the world is truly like both within and beyond its brokenness.

Sabbath is that one day each week when we stop long enough for beauty to break through, for our sublime dependence upon God to enter our busyness and remind us to whom we belong. It is a day for special foods, for special prayers, for family and friends. It is a day for welcoming our vulnerability and letting go of the illusion that it is by our work that the planets stay in their courses. It is a day for recognizing how the sacred surrounds us and how God makes something holy of us together. This only happens when Sabbath is practiced as reliably as breathing.

Pause and Reflect: What would need to change in your life for you to experience Sabbath in this biblical sense? What would need to change for your family? Your church? Your community?

Jesus and the Word: Mark 2:23–28

For faithful Jews in Jesus’ day, life was oriented around the rhythms of work and Sabbath. It was a way of giving life order and meaning. It was a way of sanctifying time itself. Sabbath gave the people opportunity to joyfully acknowledge dependence upon God and to recognize that human beings do not own or control time itself. It was a day, as Karl Barth puts it “to celebrate, rejoice and be free to the glory of God.”⁴

Sabbath had to be observable in life. It was something one did. It was a distinctive characteristic of Jewish life and was at the heart of Jewish practice and identity in the midst of a Roman dominated culture. Keeping Sabbath was a sign of Jewish piety.

By the time of Jesus, specific instructions for keeping Sabbath had become an accepted and revered part of the Law. Sabbath never lost its heart of celebration, rest, and the belief that to obediently stop was a way of honoring God. The rules were adopted to help people do that. Over time it became easy to confuse the rules of Sabbath keeping with the spirit of Sabbath consciousness. The focus, rather than a reorientation of all of life, became abstinence from work. There was much debate as to what constituted actual work. Thirty-nine classes of prohibited labor are listed in the Mishnah, a collection of oral law dating to about 200 CE. In the Babylonian Talmud there were 156 double pages filled with decisions about Sabbath observance. The Talmud records such things as the longest permissible journey (two thirds of a mile) and the heaviest weight to be lifted and carried (the weight of a fig). Debate was endless. One thing about which there was nearly universal agreement, however, was that Sabbath laws could be suspended in order to protect life.

Jesus often extended the boundaries of Sabbath observance and got into hot water with the Pharisees for doing so. In the passage in Mark 2 that we are studying, Jesus has allowed his disciples to pick some grain to eat as they pass through a field. When Jesus is confronted with this, he makes the argument, using 1 Samuel 21:3–6 as his text, that human need supersedes the Sabbath Law. The priority in moral decision-making is always on human need over legalistic purity.

Jesus goes on to say, “The sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the sabbath.” In other words, he reminds us that Sabbath is to be gift and not a burden. It is to bring life and not to take it. After refocusing the argument for the Pharisees, Jesus claims his authority over even the Sabbath itself. His point is that all of the Law is a gift from God. Sometimes, though, the Law must become subordinate to the work of the kingdom. Jesus’ healings on the Sabbath are one example of this dynamic truth.

Some commentators over the years have used this text to argue that Jesus frees his followers from Sabbath practice. A careful reading of Jesus’ own life would argue against that interpretation. Jesus always keeps Sabbath and makes of it the holy gift that it is intended to be. Sabbath is for joy and wholeness. On Sabbath the hungry are fed. On Sabbath the wounded are made whole. On Sabbath everything is oriented around the values of God. When the intricacies of Sabbath rules support God’s values, well and good. When they do not, then God’s values of life, love, and justice must win the day.

Pause and Reflect: Name examples of ways in which Jesus might be calling you and your study group or your congregation to refocus on the deepest principles of Sabbath rest and justice? What are some concrete ways you might start that practice?

The Word for Today

To keep Sabbath today is to do more than take time off with the family. Keeping Sabbath is to reject the values of dominant American culture that teach us that we are what we do, that the more we do the better we are, that it is somehow admirable to work ourselves to death, and to never stop doing. Americans work 350 hours, or nine weeks,

more per year than the average European, and we have the commensurate stress, heart attacks, and cancers to go with it.⁵

To keep Sabbath in our day can be a form of gentle but powerful protest against work ruling our lives. With that protest we declare that the world does not own us, or our time, or our hearts. Keeping Sabbath invites us to reflect on what we do and how what we do affects our lives, family, and world. Just as our ancestors saw Sabbath as a day for keeping the memory of freedom from bondage in Egypt alive in their hearts so that they would never again fall into slavery or, worse yet, enslave others, keeping Sabbath invites us to examine bondage anew in our lives and world. It is a day to protest enslavement even of our selves to our work, paid or unpaid, our relationships, and our goals. Sabbath-keeping invites us to address commercialism. It also invites us to examine the unsettling truth that stopping work is not necessarily keeping Sabbath.

Sabbath awakens us to the pauses in life and calls us to find in those open spaces a chance to connect deeply with God and receive our needed nourishment. The practice of Sabbath addresses the emptiness of lives lived with no free and open spaces.

Keeping Sabbath calls us out of our self-centeredness and into a faith community where our lies are exposed and our dependence is unmasked. Sabbath invites us to remember that keeping busy cannot substitute for holiness, that the emotions and frustrations of the moment cannot substitute for constancy, and that discipline and immediate gratification cannot substitute for hope. Sabbath is a day for God and me and a day for God and us. Sabbath is not just a day for me and mine.

Keeping Sabbath includes worship together in community. God recognized early on that when we cease to worship together, we lose a sacred link to divine presence, and the beloved community falters. Everything becomes shallow and transactional, rapacious. When we fail to worship together, we forget who we are on purpose. When our view of God and the church shrinks to an option on a menu of treats to be chosen or abstained from by whim, we are in danger. Loss of Sabbath practice is not only a violation of the Fourth Word, it is a signal of community collapse.

Pause and Reflect: What was most surprising or intriguing to you about this lesson? What is one thing you will take with you from your study of this Word?

Praying with the Word Together or Alone

Mikva, in talking about Sabbath, tells this story: “A great pianist was once asked by an ardent admirer: ‘How do you handle the notes as well as you do?’ The artist answered, ‘The notes I handle no better than many pianists, but the pauses between the notes—ah, that is where the art resides.’”⁶ Take a moment to breathe deeply. Notice the pause between when you inhale and when you exhale. Quiet yourself for a moment. Ponder God’s invitation to you to regularly stop for Sabbath rest and reorientation. What resistance do you feel to God’s invitation? Note it and let it go for now. When you are ready, write about the experience in your journal.

Sit quietly for a moment with your eyes closed. Repeat the first phrase of Psalm 46:10, “Be still and know that I am God,” slowly and deliberately three times. Shorten the phrase to “Be still and know,” and repeat it three times. Shorten again to “Be still” and repeat three times. Finally, shorten to “Be.” Repeat three times. Let the quiet linger for a moment or two. Perhaps the silence will begin to feel full of presence. You have taken a mini-Sabbath.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, we are not good at stopping. We make every excuse in the world for not keeping Sabbath. We think it is about recreation and fail to realize that it is about re-creation. Help us, Lord, to find and commit to Sabbath ceasing and begin to be the change we long to see in the world. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.



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CHALLAH FOR SABBATH

Impoverished Jews in Eastern Europe ate dense peasant bread all week. For the Sabbath, they saved their money to buy more refined flour and made braided bread called *challah*. They said that the Sabbath was a taste of heaven and in heaven they would be rich.⁷ For

this recipe you will need:

- ¼ c. oil, plus extra for greasing the dough and the cookie sheet
- 1 t. salt
- 1 T. sugar
- ¾ c. hot water
- 1 package dry yeast and ¼ cup lukewarm water
- 2 eggs
- 3 ½–4 c. all-purpose flour, plus extra for kneading the dough
- ¼ c. sesame seeds (optional.)

Instructions

Pour the oil, salt, and sugar into a large mixing bowl. Add the hot water. Mix until the salt and sugar crystals dissolve.

Mix the yeast and lukewarm water in a small bowl until yeast dissolves.

Break the eggs into a small bowl and beat them with a fork. Set aside two tablespoons of beaten egg to brush on the shaped *challah* loaf before baking.

Pour the remaining beaten eggs into the large bowl. Add the dissolved yeast mixture. Mix until combined.

Add flour to the mixture in the large bowl, one cup at a time. Mix after each addition. Continue mixing until ingredients hold together in a ball.

Flour a board and your hands. Knead the dough for about five minutes or until the dough is smooth. Sprinkle additional flour onto hands and board if dough is sticky, add flour to the dough as you knead it. Roll dough into a ball again.

Put a few drops of oil on your hands. Pat the oil on the ball of dough. Place the oiled dough back in the bowl, cover with a towel, and put in a warm place to rise.

Let the dough rise for about an hour or until twice its original size. Put dough on the floured board again. Knead for one minute. Cut dough into six equal pieces. Knead each piece briefly.

Roll each dough piece between your hands until it is about nine inches long. Braid three strands together to form a loaf. Make two loaves.

Grease a cookie sheet.

Put two loaves on sheet, cover with a towel and allow to rise for 45 minutes at room temperature.

Brush loaves with reserved egg wash. Sprinkle with sesame seeds if desired.

Bake at 375° for 30 minutes or until loaves are a toasty brown color.

Allow to cool slightly and eat while still warm with butter and jam.

WORDS OF LOVE: KEEP SABBATH

The Fourth Word

Central Concept

Sabbath is a sacred gift that helps us fuse our personal, intimate relationship with God with our relationship with others as disciples Jesus calls to shape our lives around the good news. Examining what Sabbath meant in early times and in Jesus' time can help us reorient our lives to Sabbath practice for our own lives and times and hear clearly its invitations to reorganization and renewal.

Come Together (5 minutes)

Light a candle or candles and pray the opening prayer in unison, which, as the author explains, is “the traditional prayer for welcoming Sabbath” in the Jewish tradition. Feel free to use another prayer and invite the Holy Spirit to illumine today's study with insights into ways all participants might more deeply worship God only and joyfully embrace the gift of Sabbath, even as Jesus embraced and explained the true meaning of Sabbath in his tradition.

Connect (Activity One—10 minutes, Activity Two—5 minutes)

Activity One: Post “Strongly agree” and “Strongly disagree” signs on either side of the room with a clear path between them. Invite participants to listen to these statements and express where they stand on each by going to a place on the imaginary continuum between the two opinions. For the ones with an asterisk (*) and as time allows, invite participants to find a partner and have a one-minute conversation (30 seconds each) about why they chose to stand where they did. Consider pairing people with someone on an opposite end of the continuum, or in places other than their own, or right beside them.

1. I am usually in such a hurry in the morning I don't have much time for conversation.
2. I don't know what I'd do without my cell phone—not just for emergencies. I feel compelled to answer it whenever it rings in case I might miss something.
3. Yes, I'm busy! I count on being able to multitask to make everything I need to do fit into my day.
4. A majority of Sundays I choose to spend time with my family since family time is so hard to find.
5. I'm so used to rushing, I find myself rushing even when I don't need to!
6. *When I was little, my family always kept Sundays for church and rest. No sports or parties for us unless it was a family gathering.
7. My work was/is very important to my identity. After all, I spent/spend eight-plus hours a day doing it!
8. *Most of my Sabbath day choices give me life and enrich my relationship with God.
9. I believe you can worship anyplace, not just in church.
10. *Going to worship on Sunday is very important to me. I hardly ever miss, including when I'm on vacation.

Activity Two: Invite participants to read aloud Exodus 20:8–11, the fourth Word, in unison. It is printed on the first page of this lesson.

Point out the core wound that today's session addresses in its exploration of the fourth Word—“Busyness that substitutes

for holiness, and achievement that substitutes for identity.” Ask participants to name, in brief words or phrases, the part of a worship service that most highlights for them God's holiness. Then ask them to turn to a neighbor and name something they have done in their lifetime that defines who they are or who they want to be.

Consider and Converse (25 minutes)

Explain that the author connects the first three Words, which invite us into a loving relationship with God, to the last five Words, which focus on “our life together in community,” through the fourth Word, on Sabbath. Say, “An exploration of Sabbath will help us see how Sabbath weaves our relationship with God into our life in community, shaping us for our role as disciples of Jesus Christ, for that is who and whose we truly are.”

Create groups of three. Provide all participants with the handout on page 110 of definitions of Sabbath and Sabbath-keeping found under “The Fourth Word” and “Jesus and the Word,” together with questions to guide the small group discussion. Give them twenty minutes to work.

Reconvene as a whole group. Invite each person to read their Sabbath statement of hope, followed by the litany response in unison: “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.”

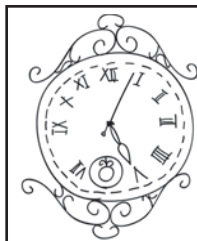
Care and Commit (10 minutes)

Ask participants to find “The Word for Today,” then, in pairs, quickly skim it and number and highlight the eight “Keeping Sabbath/Sabbath invites us/calls us . . .” statements, ending with number eight,

“Keeping Sabbath includes worship together in community.”

Give participants five minutes of quiet time working alone to choose one of the eight invitations that speaks most to them. Ask them to listen to it as a personal word from God to keep Sabbath in this way. Say, “You might use these questions to guide your reflection, or simply reflect on your current Sabbath practices and how you want to shape those in the near future in the light of this invitation.”

1. Why are you drawn to the invitation you chose?
2. How might you change your Sabbath practice to respond to this invitation?



Lesson Three

Have 30 minutes or less with your group? Read aloud the “Central Concept” and the Word (commandment) for the day then use:

“Consider and Converse,” using the handout, or “Care and Commit.”

Close your eyes and imagine yourself doing a new thing or being in a new way.

3. Decide on a small step you can take now toward your new approach to Sabbath. Commit to it by thanking God for God’s Sabbath invitation and for your new insight.

Commune and Close (5 minutes)
Invite participants as a whole group to

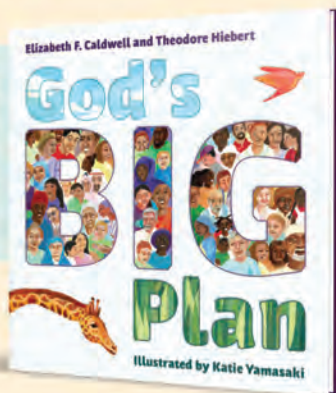
engage in the prayer practice on page 43 using Psalm 46:10. This will be more effective led in a meditative way so that participants can focus on the activity and experience a mini-Sabbath.

Gather in a circle and pray the closing prayer in unison. Maybe your group would enjoy sharing challah together, as the author suggests.

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WORDS OF LOVE:
HONOR THE LIFE-GIVERS

LESSON FOUR

THE FIFTH WORD

Scripture: Exodus 20:12 and Luke 9:57–62

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you (Ex. 20:12).

Purpose

The purpose of Lesson Four is to explore the gift of life and our responsibility to those who bring us to life.

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, heavenly parent, help us to learn the ways of honoring that which, and those who, are honorable. Help us to give priority and time to those who bring us to life. Help us to see reflections of your parenting grace in the people in our lives. May we honor you as we honor them. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Opening the Envelope

In this lesson we will explore the point in the Ten Words when they pivot from direct intimacy with God to intimacy with God through the beloved community. We will consider life itself as God's fundamental gift, the most basic blessing that God gives to us, and think about how we are to honor those whom God uses to bring us to life. We will examine the importance of generational connectedness and how the issue of elder abuse and neglect grows out of forgetting the sacred character of our life together. **The life wounds that this Word address are rootlessness, the inability to forgive, and disdain for life itself.**

The Fifth Word: Honor Your Father and Your Mother (Exodus 20:12a)

When I first began studying this Word, I emailed a colleague who I knew had grown up in particularly difficult circumstances with parents who were unable to give him the love and nurture he longed for and deserved. Yet, I knew, too, that he took care of his aging parents mindfully and with constancy.

I asked him how he approached this Word. He responded with a thoughtful and touching note. For him, honoring his parents is a duty he took on that was not based on love of them, but on love of Christ. He said that he chooses to visit them regularly in order

to make sure that they do not fall into circumstances that are degrading to any human being. He does that so that no matter what has happened in the past, there can be something of the dignity that is due the life (that precious animating gift of God) that is in them. “If I were not a Christian, I am sure that I would have nothing to do with my parents,” he writes. “But I am, and I honor them so that I do not neglect my roots and because they are the instruments through which God gave me this life that I can live with Christ.” Wow.

The meaning of the Fifth Word is not as simple as obeying our parents. It is bigger than that. It is not even a command to love our parents or to respect them. The Fifth Word is about how we honor life and all of the people who bring and nurture life in us. Because God chose to offer the gift of life to us through human parents, those parents are to be given a place of honor in our lives as the instruments through which God draws each of us into being and into relationship with God. This honoring is called for even if biological parents have not been a part of our lives. Honoring is not, however, limited to our biological parents. The call to honor parents applies to all of those whom God has used to parent us in one way or another. These ones act for God and therefore are worthy of honor.

Little was more important in the ancient world than honor. Society was organized on a shame/honor continuum. Actions were chosen for their morality, but also for how they would impact the individual’s or family’s position of honor or status in the community. People understood early on that a key purpose of life was to give appropriate honor and to be appropriately honorable.

In addition to being about giving honor where it is due for the well-being of the family and community, this Word is also about survival. It is about the survival of God’s promise to Abraham: the promise of life, land, blessing, and descendants (Gen. 12:1–9.) The biblical concern to honor parents is rooted in commitment to the sacred community that God calls into being in that promise. It is about the maintenance of the Covenant community and the furthering of God’s plan for salvation. Honoring those who bring us to life ensures that wisdom, honed by experience and a life of faith, is not cast aside in favor of expediency, urgency, or to avoid irritation. For a community to survive and move forward it must have the capacity to learn from the past and to respect the wisdom gained from living life.

Pause and Reflect: What is one example of wisdom you learned from parents, grandparents, or other elders that has impacted your life? What one thing above others would you hope that children in your life learn(ed) from you?

The Fifth Word is the first of the Ten to be aimed specifically at human relationships and is the only one that comes with a specific promise attached. The Fifth Word begins the conversation where all human relationships begin: with the family. In early Israel, family life was different from today. Families, in addition to being relational, were also economic unions. (We will discuss this further when we consider the Seventh Word in Lesson Eight.) The survival of the tribe, the name, the promise of land and posterity, all rested in how life was ordered and honored in the family. The shame/honor system ensured that choices were made in order to bring honor to the family and to avoid bringing

shame. Decisions that brought honor advanced the family's position and security in the community and made future marriage prospects brighter. Decisions that brought shame on the family could have dire financial as well as emotional and social repercussions.

The language of the Hebrew text suggests that this injunction is addressed to mature adults in the community. It is important to understand this because this Commandment, when directed at younger children, can be terribly misused. What is intended for life and blessing can too easily become an excuse for abuse and maltreatment. To tell a young child to honor and/or obey a parent who is abusive or neglectful is a combustible and contemptible command indeed. That is far from the loving heart of this Word.

Given to adult children, the command to honor parents has a context in the story of the people of God. Commentators suggest that this Word is given, at least in part, to address a specific problem: elder abuse. Israel had a long history of struggling to honor elderly parents. Lot's daughters get him drunk and rape him. Jacob tricks his feeble father into giving him Esau's birthright. Shimon (Simeon) and Levi trick their father by murdering the clan of Shechem. Rachel dishonors Laban by stealing his household gods and claiming she is having her period to avoid being searched. Finding the proper place of honor for parents has always been a bit problematic, even for God's people.

What does *honor* actually mean? Does it mean "agree with"? "Obey"? "Sacrifice on behalf of"? Yes and no. The Hebrew text uses the word *kabbed* here. We translate it as "honor." *Kabbed* comes from the root for "fear" or "revere" and it means "to give something its due weight or importance." It does not mean to obey without question. While God's people sometimes struggled with honoring parents, Jewish thought through the centuries has assumed that most parents are honorable, even if flawed. When parents are honorable, loving, and trustworthy, they are to be obeyed. When honorable parental authority declines, communities collapse.

There are indications in later writings that the meaning of this Word was expanded over time to emphasize the command to obey. Even then, the people were to obey not for the sake of the parents but for the sake of the community. In every case, if obedience to parents renders obedience to God impossible, then children are released from this command.

We are to do more than obey, however; *kabbed* means to give a place of priority or precedence in our lives to those we honor. To honor means to take concrete action for the dignity of another. It means to perform positive acts to help, bring joy, and improve the lives of those honored. The Talmud puts it this way: "Honor means that [they] must give [them] food and drink, clothe and cover [them], and lead [them] in and out."¹ As many of God's commands do, this one safeguards the vulnerable from abuse.

One of the remarkable aspects of this Word is that mothers are included in the call to be honored. In a patriarchal society in which men's words, stories, and worth were dominant and usually unquestioned, extending the command "to honor" to women was indeed a breathtaking breakthrough of God. It was an acknowledgment of women as instruments of God's own creative power. It explicitly valued women's biological role and also elevated women's stories, wisdom, and insight to a level equal to that of men.

1 The Reciprocal Commandment

Gradually, as new revelation was offered in both the Old Testament and the New, the call to honor father and mother came to be seen as reciprocal. This Word calls children to give honor and it also calls parents to be honorable. In his *Institutes*, John Calvin says that this command calls children to offer “reverence, obedience, and gratitude” to parents.⁴ He further states that parents are to strive to be honorable in all their dealings with their children and to teach them the ways of God. In his commentary on the book of *Ephesians*, Calvin releases children from the command to honor when parents are not honorable.⁵

2 A Parent’s Longing to Be Honorable

Marian Wright Edelman, executive director of the Children’s Defense Fund, captures the longing to be honorable in a letter that she writes to her sons. “I seek your forgiveness for all the times I talked when I should have listened; got angry when I should have been patient; acted when I should have waited; feared when I should have delighted; scolded when I should have encouraged; criticized when I should have complimented; said no when I should have said yes and said yes when I should have said no. I did not know a whole lot about parenting or how to ask for help. I often tried too hard and wanted and demanded so much, and mistakenly sometimes tried to mold you into my image of what I wanted you to be rather than discovering and nourishing you as you emerged and grew.”⁶

Two important values underlie this Word. First, life itself is the ultimate gift from God and life is to be honored at every stage. Valuing life extends even beyond death. Death itself becomes a celebration of life. By Jewish custom, a dead body is like a damaged Torah scroll. It is no longer able to fulfill its created purpose, but it is to be revered for the holy purpose it once served. For this reason, a body is never left unattended from the time of death until burial. A special prayer that affirms life and accepts God’s will is said daily. The 12-month mourning period for parents after death, exceeds that for all other relationships, even for spouses.² Life is sacred, and those whom God uses as instruments to bring life perform a sacred function that is, in and of itself, worthy of honor.

A second value underlying this Word is the place of wisdom in the community. It is as dangerous to misuse our spiritual parents and the gathered wisdom of the community as it is to misuse our biological parents. Experience really does matter. God is a God who is revealed in human life, in history, and in story. Those who have lived long enough carry generational wisdom. They understand that decisions made today are lived with tomorrow. Gaining wisdom takes time. The Talmud says, “When a sage dies, the whole world mourns.”³ For this reason, Jewish wisdom advises that no decision be made without considering its effect through the seventh generation. Those who go ahead of us are, therefore, to be honored for their lived and learned experience.

Pause and Reflect: How might this long view (seven generations) affect your daily decisions? Imagine your study group or church seven generations from now. What wisdom would you hope to pass on to them?

Certainly, there are examples of the people of Israel struggling with the command to honor parents. Caring for parents who cannot care for themselves is exhausting and expensive. Care like that often takes resources from a family’s other pressing needs. It always has. Still, there are stories in the Bible where honoring a parent sets in motion life-saving events. In the book of Ruth, three women—Naomi, the mother-in-law, and Ruth and Orpah, the daughters-in-law—face an uncertain and frightening future after the deaths of their husbands. Naomi determines that she will go back to her home in Bethlehem. The younger women do not want to leave Naomi and they decide to go with her to Judah. Naomi has no way to provide for the young women and part way home, she urges them to go back to their mothers’ houses where they can be cared for and new husbands can be secured. Orpah finally obeys, but Ruth will not leave Naomi on her own and makes one of the most beautiful speeches of love and loyalty in the scriptures (Ruth 1:16–17).

Both Orpah and Ruth, with their different actions, honor Naomi. They give weight to her needs and her wisdom, and, in so doing, move the story forward. Ruth becomes an ancestor of David and ultimately of Jesus. In this story we see, from the actions of the younger women, that sometimes obedience (Orpah returning to her mother) honors parents and sometimes disobedience (Ruth refusing to leave Naomi) honors them.

Pause and Reflect: Ruth resisted society’s expectations and Naomi’s wishes that she return to her home and her mother. What role do you think resistance can play in honoring? How can we tell the difference between resistance that honors and resistance that acts in fear? 1 2

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the leaders of the movement wrestled with this Word in a family context and a social one. In their historical contexts they saw in this Word the call to honor civil authority as well. They believed that governments exercised a type of parental authority to lead, guide, and protect the whole community. Martin Luther taught that this Word called for obedience to the state. He saw civil government as an arm of God's own parenting. For Calvin, it was a little more nuanced. Calvin taught that learning to honor the honorable points us to honoring that which is honorable in the state. By extension, his logic suggests that when actions further the purposes of God, they are worthy of respect. As with biological parents or guardians, however, when civil actions lack integrity, ignore history, and bring shame or abuse, they are not worthy of honor and the faithful are released from that obligation.

Pause and Reflect: What are the central qualities of honorable parents? How do these qualities apply to other authorities (church, government, school, and so on)? How do you see them at work in national life? Where are they absent?

Jesus and the Word: Luke 9:57–62

There are a number of places in scripture where Jesus seems to treat his earthly parents, and parents in general, with less respect than one would expect. In one of the few stories we have from his adolescence, he scares his parents half to death by going to the synagogue without telling them. When his parents find him, after searching for him for three days, he blames them for being worried (Lk. 2:41–52). At the wedding feast in Cana (Jn. 2:1–12), Jesus uses harsh words toward his mother when she asks him for help when the wine runs out. He even appears to disown her when she and his siblings arrive to try to take him in hand, when his behavior, in their view, has become erratic and dangerous enough to bring dishonor on the family (Mk. 3:31–35). Still, at the cross, he looks with compassion on his mother and ensures, as he is dying, that the beloved John will care her for (Jn. 19:25–27). In so doing, he honors her to the end of his life on earth.

By the end of Luke 9, Jesus has completed his Galilean ministry and is on his final trip to Jerusalem and the cross. The passage is somber and filled with urgency. Along the way, people want to join him as disciples. One man responds to Jesus's invitation to follow him by saying that he must go and bury his father and will join him later. Jesus, rather remarkably, says, "Let the dead bury the dead." Jesus redefines family obligations and even family configurations themselves. Family, for Jesus, becomes those who follow him and do the will of the Father (Mk. 3:35). The parental role shifts to the gathered community of the faithful. They become his family. It is to them that allegiance and honor belong. It is they who hold and transmit true wisdom. It is the gathered disciples who will risk all for him, who bring him to life. It is to them that he pledges honor and even offers up his own life.

Here Jesus teaches that honor belongs to those who share the life of faith with us. For Christians, that becomes the Church. Perhaps that is, in part, why we have often spoken of "Mother Church." John Calvin talked of the nurturing role of the church as mother.⁷

③ **Yiddish proverb:** “Even a little hurt from your kin is worse than a big hurt from a stranger.”

The call to honor our families of faith does not negate the call to honor parents. It reminds us that we are to give honor and priority to those who bring us to life spiritually as well as physically.

Pause and Reflect: How do we show honor and respect in our church families? Who are some of your spiritual mothers and fathers? How did they bring you to life and transmit wisdom?

The Word for Today ③

If we were blessed to grow up in loving, stable homes with parents who were, while not perfect, by any definition honorable, then giving them a place of precedence in our lives is easy and joyful. Sometimes, in those circumstances, we may be most tempted to “dishonor” inadvertently by giving them too much weight in our lives and never fully developing on our own.

If our homes were not stable or loving, this Word is almost too painful to contemplate. Are we to give a place of precedence to those who abandoned, wounded, or abused us? Are we to honor those who put us down, taught us to distrust ourselves, and left us in some ways shattered? Perhaps the call, in circumstances such as these, is to enter into the journey of forgiveness, not for the sake of the ones who hurt us, of course, but for our own freedom and release. One way of honoring our parents, even if they have hurt us, is by committing to our own healing. Another is by going through the hard work of forgiveness and release. When we refuse to allow the pain of our past, particularly childhood or parental pain, to rule our present and define our future, we honor life at its deepest level. Saying to a wounding parent, “I honor the gift of life you gave me by choosing to live it fully, no longer bound by what has gone before, wide awake to what can come next,” is a profound way of abiding by this command without pretending that that pain or abuse was somehow okay.

Pause and Reflect: What role do you think forgiveness can play in honoring parents? What about in honoring Mother Church?

The Fifth Word also invites us to consider how we make choices as a society to deal with the elderly. The call to honor parents makes clear that we are forbidden to make choices, individually or as a community, that would dismiss or limit the kind of care we give to those who have worked their whole lives and now find themselves alone and without the resources to care for themselves. Honoring in this way draws us into the public sphere where our commitment to God calls us to shape policies that protect and honor those who have made us who we are as a people. It can start in our own congregations as we create opportunities to hear stories, share wisdom, and include the voices of older members.

Pause and Reflect: A colleague of mine created “Generation Dinners” at her church. She set up a series of dinners in her home for groups of eight women. In each group there was one woman in her 20s, one in her 30s, one in her 40s, and so on, up to a woman in her 90s. During these dinners the women told their stories and learned from the shared wisdom of the decades. How might your PW group honor the spiritual mothers in your congregation?

The Fifth Word, with its startlingly egalitarian tone (fathers and mothers are both due honor) reminds us to keep our stories, to tell them, to give weight to them; for, as the old Jewish proverb says, “The only truly dead are those who have been forgotten.”⁸ The promise is surely true that when we honor the life-givers, we live long in the land of blessing.

We can also consider this Word a call to honor all of those in our lives who, in one way or another, bring us to life: friends, teachers, pastors, colleagues, mentors, spouses, and children. Giving a place of precedence and priority to those who bring us to life means that we do not give a place of precedence to those who damage us or diminish us, who sap our emotional strength. It is not easy to make choices like these because the people who deplete us are often the ones most adept at making us feel guilty when we set limits. Often, too, we feel like failures if we cannot help others or be there for them in the ways they seem to need. Still, this Word is about life, and God uses many people to bless us with full lives. If we don't give priority to the ones who nurture life in us, then the blessing attached to this Command can be forfeited.

Pause and Reflect: Who are the life-givers in your life? How did or do they bring you to life? How can you honor them? What are the obstacles in the way of honoring them? What was most surprising or intriguing to you about this lesson? What is one thing you will take home with you from this study?

Praying with the Word Together or Alone

Take a moment to quiet yourself and breathe deeply. When you have found a bit of inner space, rest there for a moment. Invite God to help you remember the names or images of people who have brought you to life. You might not remember all of their names. No worries. God remembers. Silently thank each person and honor the gift they brought to you. When you are ready, open your eyes. Return to the circle you drew in Lesson Two. To the list of names for God, add the names of the people from this meditation. As you add names, you create a circle of rich blessing to help you remember whom you honor.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, our heavenly parent, we honor you. We thank you for bringing us to life and for our parents and others whom you have used to nurture and provide for us. We thank you for the gift of life itself. Keep us mindful of the needs of the elderly and help us to honor this Word by honoring all of the ones who bring us life. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

WORDS OF LOVE: HONOR THE LIFE-GIVERS

The Fifth Word

Central Concept

Honoring our fathers and mothers is about honoring, caring for, and protecting those who bring us to life, both biologically and spiritually. Remembering these people and passing on their gifts of life reminds us of their legacy and multiplies the gift throughout our congregations and beyond.

Come Together (10 minutes)

Gather in a circle, whether in chairs or standing shoulder to shoulder. Invite each person to name two or three people they would like to think of as we explore the Fifth Word, “Honor the life-givers.” Tell them they may certainly include parents, but ask them to think broadly about people who have brought them to life through nurture, protection, guidance, or mentoring. Since there will be time for stories and context later, ask them to simply offer a name and role: for example, Maria—mother; Don—teacher; Isabella—mentor.

So that they will not need to bring their study books to the circle, ask a member of the group ahead of time to be prepared to pray aloud the opening prayer.

Connect (10 minutes)

Explain that the author sets the stage for the breadth of inclusion this commandment offers: “The Fifth Word is about how we honor life and all of the people who bring and nurture life in us” (page 50) and “The call to honor parents applies to all of those whom God has used to parent us in one way or another. These ones act for God and therefore are worthy of honor” (page 50).

Form groups of three or four and ask participants to do the following:

1. Recall an important act of love and support from your childhood or a moment when someone guided you wisely, and briefly describe it, together with the name of the one who “parented” you in this way.
2. On the first page of this lesson, find the Fifth Word in Exodus 20:12 and read it together.
3. The core wound addressed in this lesson is “rootlessness, the inability to forgive, and disdain for life itself.” If any of these feelings or reactions are familiar to you from your childhood, or you know of situations that have resulted in these life wounds, briefly describe them (if you feel safe to do so). Or, name social conditions and situations that children in today’s world face that concern or alarm you, that prompt you to cry out for God’s care and justice.

Consider and Converse

(20 minutes)

Explain that there are important things to consider about the author’s examination of the Fifth Word. Ask participants to choose the statements below that they believe illuminate situations in their congregation and community, and use these to lead a discussion that will be fruitful for application, advocacy, action for individuals, or for group response. Don’t attempt to cover too many topics. Careful selection of two, or three at most, will provide time for in-depth discussion and offer opportunity for creative deepening of response.

- The Fifth Word is the only one that comes with a specific promise, namely, “. . . [S]o that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” Why might honoring both

our physical and spiritual parents prolong or enrich our days?

- The shame/honor system was important in early Israel. In fact, we still carry the weight of the expectations of not embarrassing the family name and of honoring our family with our actions. What is one thing you did in your past that you regret doing because it may have harmed your family in some way? What is one thing you did that may have honored their trust in you? How might recalling this aspect of family history shape your actions today?
- “The language of the Hebrew text suggests that this injunction is addressed to mature adults in the community” (page 51). Refresh your memory about the potential for misinterpretation of this commandment when it is used to allow abuse and mistreatment of one’s children or one’s elders. Name some standards of care for children and elders that you hold sacrosanct.
- “To honor means to take concrete action for the dignity of another. It means to perform positive acts to help, bring joy, and improve the lives of those honored. . . . As many of God’s commands do, this one safeguards the vulnerable from abuse” (page 51). What elder populations might be vulnerable to abuse in your own community? What does your congregation already do to help, bring joy to, and improve the lives of the elderly in your church or wider community? What more might your congregation do in this regard; what unmet needs do you see, what vulnerable populations can you identify together?
- “In a patriarchal society in which men’s words, stories, and worth were dominant and usually unquestioned, extending the command ‘to honor’ to

women was indeed a breathtaking breakthrough of God. It was an acknowledgment of women as instruments of God's own creative power. It explicitly valued women's biological role and also elevated women's stories, wisdom, and insight to a level equal to that of men (page 51)."

Read this quote aloud two or three times and listen for affirmation, invitation, and empowerment. Sit in silence with these words for a few moments. Then respond: What is affirmed for women in this statement? What invitations do you hear in this statement? How might this statement empower your vision, imagination, intention, or action in the coming days?

- "Jewish wisdom advises that no decision be made without considering its effect through the seventh generation" (page 52). Take a moment to imagine how long that might be—not just your children, or grandchildren, or great-grandchildren, but your great-great-great-great-great-grandchildren! Now, from among these contemporary issues (or one of your own choosing), select one and think about the effect of thinking far into the future:

- Climate change (The week of October 8, 2018, the *New York Times* and many other newspapers reported that the United Nations issued an urgent challenge to confront climate change, with the warning that massive wild fires, rising sea waters, dying coral reefs, and food shortages would be upon us as soon as 2040.);
 - School shootings and the proliferation of gun violence
 - Racial inequalities and tension
 - Religious extremism
 - The threat of nuclear war.
- Review the biblical story of Ruth and Orpah on page 52 and respond to the



Lesson Four

Have 30 minutes or less with your group? Read aloud the "Central Concept" and the Word (commandment) for the day, then:

Select three or four questions from "Consider and Converse" that connect well with your group or use "Care and Commit" for an individual, introspective, exercise.

questions that follow it in "Pause and Reflect."

- The sixteenth-century reformer John Calvin taught that learning to honor the honorable points us to honoring that which is honorable in the state. By extension, his logic suggests that when actions further the purposes of God, they are worthy of respect. As with biological parents or guardians, however, when civil actions lack integrity, ignore history, and bring shame or abuse, they are not worthy of honor and the faithful are released from that obligation" (page 53). Over the course of your lifetime, what civil actions have you called into question and chosen not to honor, either in your heart or through public discourse and civil disobedience, and why?

Care and Commit (10 minutes)

Invite participants to sit in quiet for a couple of minutes with these thoughts and questions:

In the section "Jesus and the Word," the author reminds us that in Mark 3:35 Jesus claims his family is "whoever does the will of God." Jesus' followers, and subsequently the community of the faithful—by extension, the church—become his family. Jesus honors their faithfulness, leadership, and action. It follows that "we are to give honor and priority to those who bring us to life spiritually as well as physically" (page 53).

- "Who are the people who brought you to life spiritually?"

- "What gifts of wisdom or empowerment have you received from them?"
- "If they are still living, how might you let them know what they did for you and what their gifts mean to you? (For example, you might send a card or a text, make a donation in their name and let them know, find a picture of them with you and send a copy with a caption of gratitude, call them and tell them the story of something they did or said and what it meant to you, choose a verse or story from the Bible that reflects their kindness to you and send it to them with a couple of lines about what it brings to mind for you, pray for them and let them know you did so, tell a family member of theirs what they meant to you, pass on their wisdom and kindness by doing something for someone else like they did for you.) Choose a simple way to honor your living "life-givers" and commit to following through for at least one of two of them in the coming week.

Commune and Close (10 minutes)

Ask participants to find a partner and trade one story about a person who brought them to life spiritually. Ask them to share with their partner how they intend to honor that person and to invite their partner to check back with them to see what transpired.

Come together and read the closing prayer in unison.



Thou Shalt Not Kill, Nancy Spero

WORDS OF LOVE:
DON'T KILL EACH OTHER

LESSON FIVE

THE SIXTH WORD

Scripture: Exodus 20:13 and Matthew 5:21–26

You shall not murder (Ex. 20:13).

Purpose

The purpose of Lesson Five is to understand the many faces of murder and how the beloved community is to honor life by refusing any and all death-dealing behaviors.

Opening Prayer

God of grace and guidance, we sit before you today humbled as we consider our lives and the choices we have made that have caused others, many of whom we may never know, grievous and deadly harm. Awaken us this day to the exquisite value of each human being. Help us to speak words of life and not death. Help us to stand with and defend the vulnerable and the grieving. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Opening the Envelope

In the last lesson, we considered God's loving desire that we give honor to those who bring us to life, our parents and all of the other life-givers in our experience. In this lesson we examine the companion Word in which God tells us that we are not to be life-takers. Honor the life-givers. Do not be a life-taker. As we study the Sixth Word, we will explore various meanings of the Hebrew word translated as "murder." We will look at the struggle to determine whether or not there are ever limits to honoring life. We will consider our behavior, habits, and cultures—choices we make that destroy and diminish life. **The wounds that this Word addresses are the selfishness, hate, and fear that lash out and seek to destroy both God's people and the beloved community.**

The Sixth Word

A teenager slams the door and leaves the words "I wish you were dead" hanging in the air.

A husband, not looking up from his tablet, says, "You are fat and disgusting. What happened to the girl I married?"

The sheriff says in a flat voice, "Your son was killed. I'm sorry for your loss. He was shot. The perp has confessed."

“Look what you made me do,” the one who once said he loved her says as he smashes her grandmother’s teapot.

“It’s okay. Little girls don’t need math,” the teacher says, trying to ignore the shyly raised hand of the pigtailed fourth-grader.

“He was unarmed, but we felt threatened,” the neighbor explains, shotgun still in his hands.

“I didn’t know,” the investor says in disbelief when confronted with the pictures of the children who died behind locked doors in a hot factory.

Murder. The death of a body, or a spirit, or of hope for a future.

So far, each of the Ten Words we have studied has come with an explanation, motivation, or promise attached. When we get to the Sixth Word, the text is terse and to the point. No exceptions are given; no consequences are outlined. There is no wiggle room. In two stark words, God puts it out there. No murder. In those words God reminds us that if we want the life God offers, if we want the Promise in all its fullness, if we want to live out the love story for which we were created, then we must grasp this truth. We are not to kill each other.

On the surface, this Commandment is obvious. Most of us know how, most of the time, to master our own murderous impulses. Most of us have not killed anyone, although some of us may have done so accidentally or in time of war. But most of us are not murderers, right?

Most of the people of ancient Israel did not kill each other, either. Even in the bloodiest of times, when much of life was a life-and-death struggle, people took killing seriously. There is something in human beings that honors life and holds the protection of it sacred. So why was it important to God, in the formation of the community of God’s people, that this Word of love be uttered?

In part, perhaps, it was because, even though most of the time most people honor life, there are times when we wrestle with whether or not honoring life has limits, and we ask: Is it ever appropriate to take a life?

Wrestling with the Sixth Word has centered on the meaning of the Hebrew root word *rahtz-akh*. Does *rahtz-akh* refer to intentional murder with malice or, more broadly, to killing in general? A careful look at the other places in the Old Testament where this Hebrew word occurs (Deut. 4:41–42, Num. 35:20–21, and Num. 35:30, for example) shows a range of meanings. Terence E. Fretheim, in his Exodus commentary, concludes that the Sixth Word prohibits “any act of violence against an individual out of hatred, anger, malice, deceit or for personal gain, in whatever circumstance, by whatever method that might result in death, even if unintentional.”¹

According to the *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Brown, Driver, and Briggs) the Command *lo tirtza-akh* can be understood as: “1. Don’t murder or slay another person or yourself. 2. Don’t break, bruise, or crush, which can mean not to break

the will of someone or crush his or her spirit. This would apply especially to a child, a spouse, a person who is having financial problems, or a person who can't defend himself or herself. 3. Don't batter or shatter, which can mean not to assault someone physically or verbally and not to humiliate someone."² The Talmud contains several warnings that humiliating someone or using sneering words is the equivalent of murder. "The person who makes someone else ashamed in the presence of others is as if this person has shed blood."³ "You shall not murder," when defined in these ways, covers a wide range of behaviors, actions, and people.

Pause and Reflect: The prohibition against murder includes the killing of the spirit, of one's self-esteem, or one's capacity to survive. What are some examples of words or actions that "kill" in these ways?

In general, this Word has to do with executing vengeance or destruction and is used in relation to both active and passive choices. It applies to things we choose to do and to things that happen without our conscious choice but with which we are somehow complicit. It is also used to describe things that we do nothing about or don't try to stop. It refers to the taking of human life, especially innocent life, in any way, and to all acts of violence and retaliation that impart grievous harm that cannot be undone. The rabbis placed much emphasis on the fact that "to murder" in any of these ways was an action (or non-action) that could not be taken back.

Pause and Reflect: In what ways, as individuals or as a society, might we "murder" unintentionally or passively?

At the heart of this Word is a deep respect for creation. Murder is seen as the unraveling of creation and is prohibited in the beloved community. This prohibition refers to destroying anything that one does not have the power to create or restore. It includes destruction that takes place quickly in anger as well as destruction that takes place slowly over time, small choice by small choice. The rabbis talk of this anti-creation choice as robbing God.

Only God is to have the power of life and death. In the Old Testament, the taking of human life is serious business and is always the result of sin, or is sin, itself. Maimonides, the eminent twelfth-century Jewish theologian, said, "All killing involves a violation, even if overridden by mitigating factors such as unprovoked attack."⁴ People believed that the life force itself resided in one's blood. Therefore, blood was sacred and the shedding of it was outside the prerogative of human beings. This is why blood sacrifice was so potent and carefully regulated (see Lev. 17). It is also why contact with shed blood was so potentially contaminating.

It is certainly possible, from the writings of the Old Testament, to make a case for war. Even so, the scriptures make it clear that innocent life is to be protected. War itself was understood as legitimate only when instructed by God. War was seen as God's doing and not that of human beings, who were never given that power. What about the wholesale slaughter of towns, for religious purposes, that pepper the Old Testament?

❶ Wrongful Conviction

For a sobering look at the consequences of wrongful conviction in our judicial system, I recommend two books: *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson and *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander.

The texts indicate that those kinds of massacres only happened when the inhabitants refused peace. War is not prohibited outright but barbarity in war is. Explaining and analyzing that statement is beyond the scope of this study and my ability. Suffice it to say that testing the limits of the sanctity of life has always been difficult.

Managing the desire to wipe out one's enemies, to exact revenge, or simply to unleash rage, has been an age-old problem with immense consequences. After Cain, enraged that God rejected his offering and embraced Abel's, kills his brother (Gen. 4), "God declares that the bloods of his brother cry out from the ground. In the plural, it teaches that each murder kills not only the victim, but all the future children and all the creative work yet to be done by the individual as well."⁵ Although the power of this plural form is missing in most of our English translations, it is significant nonetheless. In that little nuance, God wants us to understand that destroying one human being is like destroying the whole world. The blood in our veins is communal: all blood is shared blood, all life is shared life. Taking one life diminishes all life and saving one life saves all life. This principle is central to the Sixth Word and lies at the heart of the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam).

As the people of Israel began to wrestle with whether the honoring of life had limits, they created distinctions between intentional killing and accidental killing. Both crimes usually carried the death penalty. Yet Israel set up cities of refuge to which those who had killed by accident could flee for safety and to avoid death. Killing out of hate negated that refuge (Deut. 19:1–22:8). Life matters; we cannot take it into our own hands.

The concept of proportionate punishment (*lex talionis*) was an attempt to place boundaries on our need for vengeance while still taking into account the necessity of consequences for wrong-doing. The concept of "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" was a way of acknowledging that punishment was only moral if it fit the crime (Ex. 21:23–25). Rather than a rallying cry for revenge, as it often seems today, *lex talionis* was a call for proportionality and sober reflection.

The taking or damaging of life is never a simple equation. Such actions always meddle in the prerogatives of God. Punishment rarely balances the moral scales and it often sets in motion consequences that have wide-ranging ramifications for individuals and communities. Ramifications can include blaming the victim, being numbed to violence, and continued life-taking that results in the loss of respect for life itself.

Pause and Reflect: When death is the punishment for crime, what if justice has been perverted and a person is wrongly convicted? From God's point of view, is one of God's children ever beyond redemption or expendable? If so, when and under what circumstances would that be the case? ❶

John Calvin further broadened the scope of this Word. Calvin saw it as more than an instruction intended to rein in our dangerous emotions and preserve physical life. He taught that bringing harm to a neighbor in any way is a violation of this command.

As it is with each Word, that which is prohibited leads directly to that which is encouraged. Calvin saw the Sixth Word as a call to actively seek good for our neighbors. He

saw in it the invitation to see others' lives as being as dear and precious to us as our own.⁶ In light of Calvin's interpretation, the Sixth Word becomes a call to social justice and well-being. To refuse to resist structures, patterns, and processes that systematically diminish the life of individuals or groups is, therefore, a violation of this Word. In our Reformed tradition, to allow the hungry to hunger, the worker to be exploited, the child to remain in danger is a violation of the Sixth Word. To allow -isms (racism, sexism, and so on) to go unchallenged is a violation of this Word. So is looking the other way while the state, or the company, or even the church, challenges the violation of the Word for us. Even if we are not guilty of causing ills *per se*, if we do not address society's ills, we are complicit and responsible.

② *Gehenna*

Sometimes translated into English as "hell," *Gehenna* was the garbage dump outside of Jerusalem that burned 24 hours a day. It was a truly horrible spot where nothing but the worthless wound up.

Pause and Reflect: What choices or actions do you see as 'murderous' in our day? What consequences do you see for the community at large resulting from these actions?

Jesus and the Word: Matthew 5:21–26

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expands our view of the Sixth Word significantly. The verses suggested above are the first of six sections in which Jesus preaches on the Torah. At the time, there were those who argued that he was destroying the Law and that with his teachings he released his followers from their duty to follow it. In this sermon, Jesus makes clear that this is not the case (see Matt. 5:17ff). Here he argues for the validity of the Law, expands its bounds, and reminds his hearers that there are dire consequences for refusing to be bound by these moral precepts.

Jesus begins each point with an introductory phrase, "You have heard it said . . .," in which he quotes a portion of the Law and then comments (see Matt. 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, and 43). It was common for rabbis to state a biblical text, share its traditional interpretation, then make a new point. Here, Jesus expands murder to include being angry with another person, insulting another person, and calling a person a fool. Each of these infractions sets in motion escalating consequences. The one who is angry will face judgment (a public comeuppance). The one who insults another will be brought before the Jewish Council for punishment, and the one who calls another a fool will face the fires of *Gehenna*.^② It is likely that Jesus is not speaking of hell as we understand it today. Rather, he is saying that when we speak words that shatter a life and leave a person shamed and damaged, we ourselves become useless and fit only for the garbage dump. Harsh words! In this passage, he urges us toward reconciliation and kindness, in our relationships, at all costs. Without them, retaliation, retribution, and division will render us useless to the kingdom and we will find ourselves living in a burning hell fueled by our own wasted lives.

In this brief teaching, Jesus identifies anger as a prime motivation for murder. Whether murder is physical, psychological, or spiritual, it is the same violation. Jesus urges his listeners to examine and come to terms with rage in ways that do not defile others. Failing to do so can result in death to relationships and to our own moral compasses. Unexamined anger that has no positive outlet will lead to death and leave the angry fit for nothing more than the trash heap.

3 The Deadliest Sin

From a Reformed point of view, sin does not simply consist of a laundry list of moral dos and don'ts. Sin is much bigger than that. It is a flaw at the heart of humanity in which we secretly are ruled by our own personal desires rather than the values of God. Calvin talked about it as total depravity, by which he meant that there were no human motives that were completely free of the taint of selfishness. Christian tradition often calls this "pride." It simply refers to a blinded part of us that puts our needs forever first and often refuses to acknowledge that we are doing so. It is, at its heart, the desire to be our own gods, set our own agendas, and rule our own lives. Calvin called it rebellion against divine government. I call it "Ego" with a capital E.

Pause and Reflect: Jesus indicates that our words have the power to kill. I remember once, as a chronically ill child, being assigned a substitute runner for a softball game in our Physical Education class. As I stood at bat, I overheard a child new to school ask a classmate why I didn't run the bases myself. My classmate answered, "Oh, that's Genie. She's broken." There was no intentional harm there, but a wound was inflicted that stayed with me and shaped my self-esteem. What is an example of a time in your life, or in the life of someone you know, when words said in anger, fear, or unexamined prejudices inflicted deadly harm?

In the early days of Christianity, the concept of murder evolved from the simple notion of being a crime against creation to become understood as an assault on incarnation itself. To kill is to diminish the divine expression itself and to thwart how God is trying to be made known in the real world. In the teachings of Jesus, we see that what might seem to us as justifiable homicide might really be murder to which we have been blinded by our own out-of-hand egos. 3

The Word for Today

The implications of this Word—do not kill—for our lives are immense. How does valuing life impact our decisions about war? About the death penalty? About abortion? About euthanasia? About how we allocate community resources and to whom? When does life become expendable or so degraded that one no longer seems to carry the image of God? All of those questions could carry studies of their own.

Pause and Reflect: How is it that we diminish our own lives and those of others on a regular basis? How do our words and priorities cause damage that cannot be undone?

The Talmud and the rabbis, wise teachers of the day, saw many ways to murder. "If we publicly embarrass someone, it is considered as if we shed blood because shame causes people's blood to drain from their faces." If we cause a person to lose their livelihood, we murder them. If we have knowledge and expertise and refuse to teach, we strike down many students. If we are a host who fails to provide sufficient provision or to escort a guest to safety, we are a shedder of blood. See how many opportunities there are to murder every day. Ready for more?

Crushing a person's spirit, making him or her feel small by what we do, or by what we fail to do in their defense, is a powerful violation of this Word. Succumbing to jealousy, allowing personal needs, preferences, or unhealed hurts to drive others relentlessly is murder. Wielding power for personal gain, valuing one life more than another, lying greedily about who is worthy and who is not, refusing to listen when someone needs to speak, all of these things, in the bright light of the Sixth Word, are murder. The Sixth Word leaves us humbly examining our motivations and emotions and recognizing the wisdom of the Talmud, which says, "Power buries those who wield it."⁷

Pause and Reflect: What was most surprising or intriguing to you about this lesson? What is one idea you will take home with you from this session?

Praying with the Word Together or Alone

Take a moment to quiet yourself. Breathe in deeply of the Spirit's love and cleansing power. When you have found a bit of inner peacefulness, ask God to show you the small ways that you murder others or yourself. Sit humbly with what is revealed, enveloped in grace. Face what must be faced and ask God to give you the gift of compassion toward yourself and others, to help you see beyond your own shortcomings to the hurts that need to be healed. When you are ready, open your eyes and find the letter to God that you began in your journal. Add to it any reflections on this Word.

Closing Prayer

Oh God of life and love, again we thank you for the precious gift of life itself. We thank you for placing us in a community in which we share that life together. Help us, Lord, to examine our hearts, lives, and community for that which diminishes life. Help us root it out. Help us not to kill with a casual word or with thoughtless inaction. We are grateful for every moment of each day. Thank you. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.



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WORDS OF LOVE: DON'T KILL EACH OTHER

The Sixth Word

Central Concept

The Sixth Word, “You shall not murder,” carries a breadth of meaning far beyond taking a life. Anything that diminishes life for God’s beloved children and God’s beloved community “murders” spirits, self-esteem, and another’s ability to see themselves as loved and gifted and called. A broader understanding of this commandment compels us to review our own choices and actions for behaviors that diminish humanity—others’ and our own.

Come Together (10 minutes)

On the first page of this lesson find the Sixth Word from Exodus 20:13, and read it together.

It might be surprising to you but the Bible includes a number of stories about murders. Invite the whole group to brainstorm biblical killings with which they are familiar, whether of individuals or small or large groups. List these on newsprint as offered. Then ask, “What motives do you see behind any of these murders?”

Pray the opening prayer in unison.

Connect (Activity One—15 minutes; Activity Two—20 minutes)

Activity One: Ask participants to listen for ways that Jesus both validates the Law against murder and expands its bounds as you read aloud Matthew 5:21–22. Ask what expansions they heard. When “insulting a brother or sister” is mentioned, note that a footnote in *The New Interpreters Study Bible* says the Greek actually contains an obscure term of abuse as a sample insult. The CEB (Common English Bible) Study Bible translates the insult as “You idiot.”

Propose that the old childhood defense against bullying is not true: “Sticks and stones may break my bones but names

will never hurt me.” This statement denies the deep wounds that verbal abuse inflicts. As participants read the lesson, they were asked in “Pause and Reflect” (page 61) to think of examples of words or actions that “kill” by killing the spirit of a person’s self-esteem or capacity to survive. Explain that this broad expansion of Jesus, and of one’s definition of “kill” or “murder,” is an example of the breadth of understanding we will gain from this lesson. Take time now to ask for those example words and actions, and the subsequent stories, as a way to enter into this lesson’s very broad understanding of the Sixth Word. Doing so in pairs or groups of three reduces the time needed for this activity and offers a measure of safe space, if any stories require vulnerability in the telling.

Activity Two: Note that the wounds addressed in this lesson are “selfishness, hate, and fear that lash out and seek to destroy both God’s people and the beloved community.” Ask the whole group:

1. What emotions do you imagine might be behind a desire to murder?
2. What are some ways in which murder affects a community?

Consider and Converse (20 minutes)

As a way to open an exploration of the breadth of the scope of the prohibition “You shall not murder,” present the definitions of “murder” (without interpretation) that are offered in this lesson.

Definitions of “murder” derived from this lesson:

1. “The death of a body, or a spirit, or of hope for the future (page 60)
2. “Any act of violence against an individual out of hatred, anger, malice, deceit, or for personal gain, in whatever circumstance, by whatever method that

might result in death, even if unintentional (page 60)

3. “Don’t murder or slay another person or yourself (page 60).
4. “Don’t break, bruise, or crush, which can mean not to break the will of someone or crush his or her spirit. This would apply especially to a child, a spouse, a person who is having financial problems, or a person who can’t defend himself or herself (page 60).
5. “Don’t batter or shatter, which can mean not to assault someone physically or verbally and not to humiliate someone (page 61).
6. “The executing of vengeance or destruction, either actively or passively, which cannot be taken back (page 61)
7. “The unraveling of creation . . . destroying anything that one does not have the power to create or restore . . . whether done quickly in anger or slowly over time (page 61)

Assign the definitions to pairs, one definition per pair, or, if you have more than fourteen participants, to groups of three. If fewer than fourteen, use only as many definitions as you have pairs—it is not necessary to include them all. Ask the pairs to discuss the meaning of the definition and name some real-life situations the definition might cover. Then, select one situation to present to the whole group as an illustration of its meaning.

When ready, ask the whole group to listen carefully for situations in which they might have found, or find, themselves, and invite each pair to read their definition, and name their illustration.

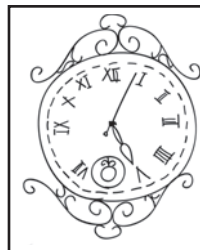
Tell the whole group: “If we embrace the breadth and depth of actions that in some

way embody this commandment's definition of murder, because of our own choices or actions, we may all find ourselves included at some level, or in some way, as murderers. Take a couple of minutes in silence to assess your own responsibility and to notice how you respond to your self-reflection." Assure participants that this will not be shared with the group.

After a few minutes in silence, ask if anyone has any new insights they would be willing to offer to the whole group.

Care and Commit (10 minutes)

Read aloud the two paragraphs that begin with "John Calvin . . ." on page 62. Lead a discussion of the two questions in the "Pause and Reflect" section that immediately follows, adding this third question: "What might you be willing to do to address just



Lesson Five

Have 30 minutes or less with your group? Read aloud the "Central Concept" and the Word (commandment) for the day, then use the section "Consider and Converse."

one of the 'murderous' actions named?" Hand out index cards and invite participants to either write down something they are working on or will work on; or look up and make eye contact with someone else who would prefer to talk about it and join her to exchange ideas and possibly agree to hold each other accountable in the coming weeks.

Commune and Close (5 minutes)

Join together in a circle. Invite anyone willing to contribute to tell the group what

"ism" or need they are currently working on or would like to work on. Then end with these words of grace:

"There is something in human beings that honors life and holds the protection of it sacred' (page 60). May God empower our good."

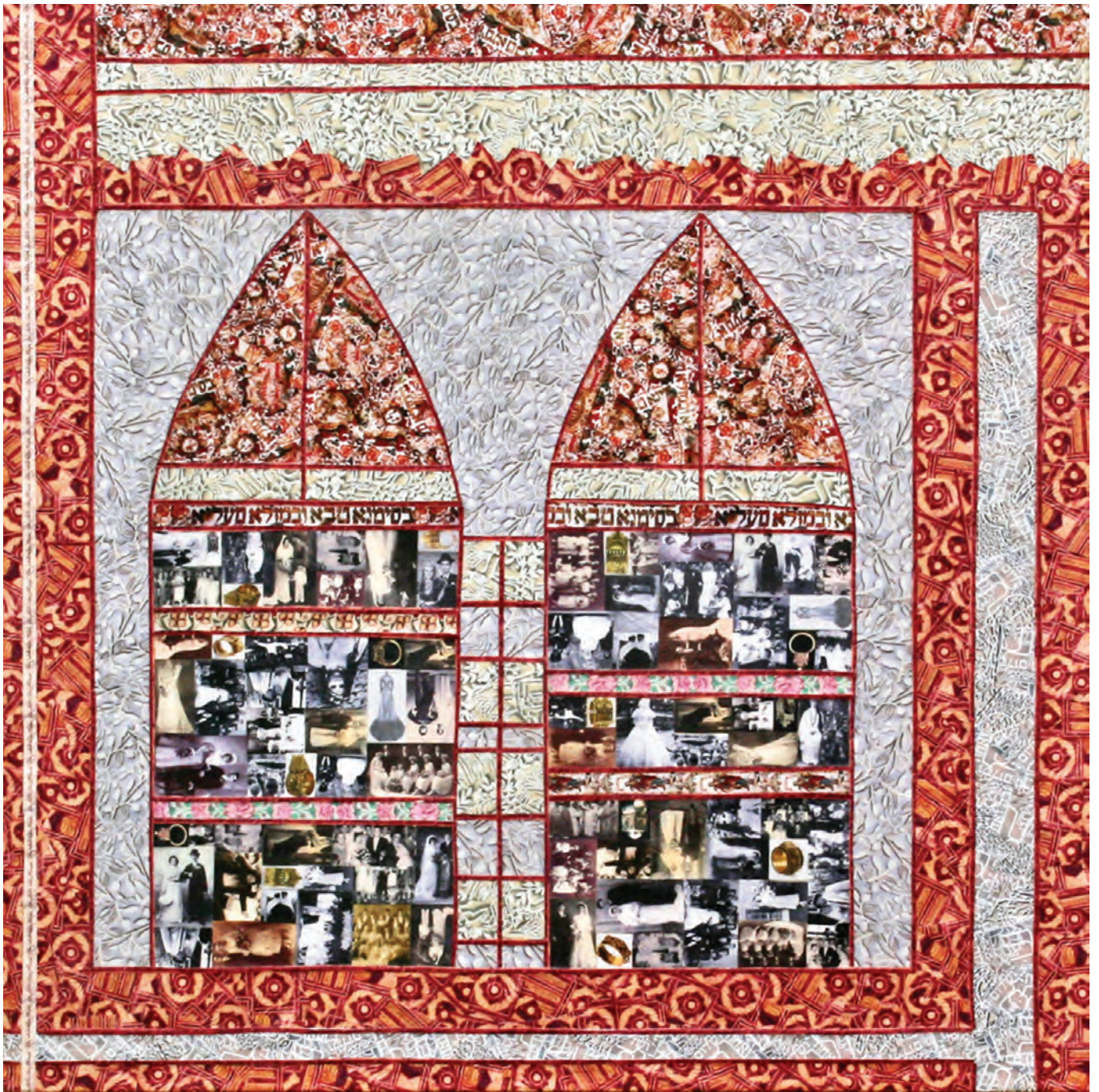
Pray the closing prayer in unison.

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Ketuba, Rachel Liebman

WORDS OF LOVE:
HOLD YOUR MARRIAGE
SACRED

LESSON SIX

THE SEVENTH WORD

Scripture: Exodus 20:14, Genesis 2:18–25, and John 8:1–11

You shall not commit adultery (Ex. 20:14).

Purpose

The purpose of Lesson Six is to understand God's desire for deep and faithful relationships in the human family and how behavior that has no boundaries can devastate people and communities.

Prayer

Gracious God, our One and Only, help us to think deeply about our relationships and to find strength and guidance from you so that we might honor and commit to those closest to us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Opening the Envelope

Previous lessons have called us to make commitments to God and to one another; we carry them into this lesson. We are filled with the knowledge of God's love for us and mindful of our calling to be honorable and true in our relationships with God. We are committed to resting in God's presence and not misusing God's name. We recognize that we love and honor God by honoring those who bring us to life. And we understand that this love letter calls us not to take life ourselves. Now we consider how God's love for us affects our most intimate relationships.

We will explore the meaning of adultery in ancient Hebrew culture and the root issue of worthy relationships. We will examine adultery as a community issue, not simply as a personal matter, and we will discover within the Command a call to integrity and reliable commitments. **The wound addressed by this Word is pain caused by superficial and exploitive relationships.**

The Seventh Word

In Alabama, during the time of the Ten Commandments monument controversy (see Introduction), serious debate was also accompanied by attempts at humor. One of the funniest exchanges I gleaned was from the Internet. Someone speculated about whether or not a plaque with the Ten Commandments on it would ever grace the walls of the

Alabama legislature. A response to that musing was that until somebody did something about that adultery thing, the legislators would want to keep the Commandments as far away from themselves as possible. Funny, yes, but also, not funny.

Adultery has become a tawdry national obsession. Each week another politician's or celebrity's sexual exploits are exposed for the entire world to see. Adultery is a word we rarely use these days. Instead, we speak with euphemisms taken from the headlines. While certainly not condoned by our society, and never by the church, adultery does not seem to carry the onus it once did. Many times, we have shaken our heads when a friend's or family member's relationship was decimated by unfaithfulness, but the "Scarlet A" no longer hangs as heavily upon us. A society that has become immune to sexual boundaries through media, entertainment, or even experience, has lost something fundamental to its understanding about the life of love into which God invites us with the love letter of the Ten Words.

To understand the Seventh Word for ourselves in a fresh way, we need to go back to the beginning. In Hebrew culture, adultery was defined in a more nuanced way than we think of it today. Adultery was technically a property crime. It had to do with the misuse of a man's property (his wife) by another man. There is scholarly debate about this understanding; some argue against adultery as a property crime and say that property crimes are covered in the Eighth Word. I am not entirely convinced of this point of view. What is certainly clear about adultery is that it was about honor and stability. And it was also about economics.

One of my seminary professors once, when addressing this Commandment, read the words in Hebrew, "*lo tin af,*" paused a long time, and said, "Just don't do it. All hell will break loose." And went on to the next Commandment. While that moment certainly reflected society's (or my professor's) discomfort with any public discussion of sex, especially in a religious environment, there is more than a little truth to what he said.

From the earliest days of Israel's life together, it has been crucial in our faith tradition to place a priority on faithful marriages. Still, sex is serious business and the rules for adultery were different for men than they were for women. Men had more leeway. For example, adultery did not apply when the man was married and the woman single, a widow, a slave, or a handmaid. In those cases, the woman, simply by the act, became a secondary wife (see Gen. 16:3 and 30:9).

Monogamy, as we practice it today, was unknown in the world of the patriarchs and early Israel. For a man to have multiple wives and concubines was a sign of status and wealth. King Solomon, revered for his wisdom and decency, had seven hundred wives and countless concubines.

Adultery applied when a married woman had sexual intercourse with a man who was not her husband. The issue was not sex itself but offspring. Our ancestors were not as squeamish about sex as we, but they were very squeamish about paternity. Life depended on it. Knowing that one's offspring were one's own was a matter of economic necessity, of honor, and of status. Because of this, adultery had the capacity to destroy

the community and blur the fulfillment of the Promise. Adultery was technically, if not practically, punishable by death (Deut. 22:22).

The fact that adultery was taken seriously enough to carry the death penalty did not mean that this penalty was routinely enforced. The seriousness of the consequence of violating this command reminded the community of the destructive power of putting personal desire above the good of the community and its members. Rabbi Daniel Schiff puts it this way:

Time and again the Torah, in both its written and oral forms, threatens dire punishments that are never intended to be carried out. The aim, rather, is to convey an unambiguous message about the values of Jewish society and the critical interest in the body politic in embracing certain behaviors and rejecting others. Overblown punishments are threatened in order to communicate just how menacing a particular infraction is seen to be to the welfare of Jewish civilization. Once the punishment has been stated, enforcement methods become largely academic; breaking the law and inviting the predetermined wrath of society—even if empirically that wrath almost never comes—is sufficiently distasteful to most people to make the educational arm of the law powerful indeed.”¹

In short, adultery was not simply a personal matter. It was a community matter. It was about much more than sexual infidelity. It was about making sure that no selfish, self-serving, or other disregarding behavior was allowed to threaten the fabric, stability, and longevity of the community. The prohibition against adultery was a command not to put personal desires of the moment above the needs for community cohesion, family harmony, and the will of God. The Seventh Word tells us plainly that we are never to allow watered-down boundaries to throw the community into chaos.

The consequences of this law fell disproportionately on women, however. One of the threatened consequences of adultery was the *sotah ordeal*. In this, a wife suspected of adultery was forced to drink a bitter and toxic drink. If she was guilty, her stomach would swell up and her “thigh would fall away.”² As in the Salem witch trials, there was little a woman could do to prove her innocence. The practice was eventually discontinued, not because it was seen as too harsh or sexist, but because the men were scared of the waters themselves.

Pause and Reflect: Do you think there is still a double standard for women and men when it comes to adultery? How do you think this Word speaks to conversations about sexual misconduct?

Marriages in early Israel were not, first and foremost, love matches. This is not to say that deep bonds of love did not grow in these unions, or to imply that families did not take children’s feelings into account when matches were made (or at least the feelings of male children). Still, marriages were economic partnerships based less on passion than

① Midrash

The Midrash are interpretations of the Hebrew scriptures written down by rabbis of the first, second, and third centuries CE, that supplied answers to questions of their day. These teachings were later compiled into books of Midrashim.

on duty and obligation to family and community. Even so, marriage was always seen as sacred and the foundational building block of society.

The Midrash taught that God officiated at the first marriage in the Garden of Eden, thereby making clear that marriage was to be honored and that God has a stake in all marriages, no matter their configuration. ① Whatever shape marriage took, the relationship was to be intimate and permanent. Divorce was permitted, at the instigation of the husband, for a variety of reasons, some as trivial as burning the bread, but divorce was clearly a falling short of the vision of partnership God designed in creation.

The fact that *yada*, the Hebrew word for sexual intimacy, means “to know,” gives a glimpse into the revelatory and sacred dimension of marriage. Persons, through time, physical intimacy, commitment, and caring, come to know one another in profound and indissoluble ways.

In the second creation story in the book of Genesis (Chapter 2), when God creates the first human being, that created one is without a partner and is desperately lonely. God sees the human’s distress and creates a partner to ease that loneliness and to create family. In compassion, God chooses to make, from the human being’s own substance, a creature worthy of true companionship and partnership. The Hebrew word *ezer* is used to describe this longed-for partner. The *ezer* is the one in whose presence both partners are safe to become all that God has dreamed for them to be. The *ezer* relationship is not manipulative, demanding, or demeaning. It does not use the other to meet essentially personal needs. *Ezer* relationships are joyful, reciprocal, and generative. Interestingly, in the biblical text, it is only after the first human is created and divided into two, that gender enters the language at all. The first words spoken by a human being in the scriptures are a love poem to the *ezer*, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken” (Gen. 2:23).

At the heart of the sacredness of marriage, in addition to the needs for procreation and the establishment of stable society, is God’s yearning for human beings to be in safe, reciprocal, and creative relationships that will endure and serve as homes for new generations.

Fulfilling relationships, societal harmony, sexual intimacy, and respect for the property and well-being of one’s neighbor all underlie the prohibition against adultery. This Word reminds us that all marriages and families must be protected from harm due to the selfish choices of others. This Word plainly tells us that in the community of love into which God calls us, we are not to meet our needs at the expense of others. The prohibition against adultery demands that we consider who and what we are willing to hurt in order to get what we think we want.

Pause and Reflect: *Ezer* relationships are not confined to marriage. Who are some of the *ezer*s in your life? Who are your safe and trusted people? Who are the ones with whom you feel perfectly yourself? How do they let you know that you are safe with them?

The prophets of Israel, Hosea in particular, used adultery as a potent metaphor for Israel’s faithless relationship with the Lord. God is portrayed as Israel’s husband, with the

Torah itself as the binding marriage agreement between them. Drawing on the experience of his own painful marriage to the unfaithful prostitute Gomer, Hosea compares Israel to a wastrel prostitute who squanders God's love and protection in an ever-widening stream of faithlessness and shallow repentance. God and Israel are the story of a broken marriage. For the prophets, all adultery is seen as a part of the larger disintegration of the community and the dangerous subjection of morality to personal ego-fulfillment. One who betrays marriage can be expected to betray God.

Pause and Reflect: In what ways do you find it tempting to adulterate your relationship with God? What other things rival God for your time, affection, and commitment? How is making a commitment to a community of faith like a marriage?

The failure of fidelity in marriage leads to dramatic social catastrophe that is beyond the pain of the individuals. In the story of King David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11), the King sees Bathsheba bathing on her rooftop. He is overcome with desire for her, sends for her, and has sex with her. We do not know if the act was consensual or not. The wife of another man, Bathsheba is given no voice in the story. Afterward, she is simply sent home. Perhaps all would have blown over except that she finds she is pregnant and sends word to David about her predicament. David hatches a plot to disguise paternity by luring Uriah, who is away fighting one of David's battles, into sleeping with his wife. The plot fails. David then has Uriah killed and takes Bathsheba as a wife. Everything begins to unravel after that. The child dies. David's sons learn from their father's behavior to take what they want no matter who is hurt, and that sets in motion what ultimately results in civil war and the death of David's son Absalom, along with thousands of others.

Adultery is never simply personal. The prohibition against it is about making sure that no selfish, self-serving choices are allowed to threaten community well-being. Anything that begins with a willingness to wound and disregard another, and the guidance of God, rarely ends well.

Jesus and the Word: John 7:53–8:11³

Even though there is no evidence in the Bible that Jesus was ever married, he had a lot to say about marriage, divorce, and adultery. It is clear throughout the Gospels that, while he understood family configurations in new ways, the sacredness of family ties remained inviolate.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:27–30), Jesus expands the definition of adultery to include inclinations of the heart along with actions of the body. What happens in the heart and mind frequently sets in motion events that cannot be reversed. Adultery is about turning away from the fundamental intimacy and commitment of a relationship. It is about mentally and physically cutting the thousand tiny threads that sew a marriage together. It is about entertaining thoughts that one might get one's needs met in ways that harm one's partner. Even if it is a momentary fantasy, according to Jesus, damage is done.

In our highly sexualized culture, in which the boundaries of relationships are sometimes given no more than lip service, it can feel overwhelming to think that

we have committed adultery with a casual fantasy. Still, the line between what we are willing to consider and what we are willing to do is often slim.

In John 8:1–11, the religious leaders bring to Jesus a woman who has been caught in adultery. If she is convicted, she could be taken to the outskirts of town, stripped to the waist, surrounded by the elders, and stoned to death. She might even be thrown into a ditch to make it easier to hit her with stones.

The leaders remind Jesus that the Law decrees that the punishment for adultery is death and asks him what he says. Famously, he tells them that whoever is without sin may cast the first stone. Bending down and writing with his finger in the sand he listens as, one by one, they all leave in silence. He asks the woman if anyone is left to condemn her. When she says that there is no one, Jesus says that he will not condemn her either and tells her to go away and sin no more. Jesus's act of grace neither condemns nor excuses her actions. He does not tell her that what she did didn't matter. He does not ask her about the man she was with or if she was coerced. Jesus simply offers grace and tells her to change her life. In every fallen moment of our own lives, Jesus still does.

Pause and Reflect: The root of the word adultery means “to cheapen” or “to water down.” Can you think of a specific time when you adulterated an important relationship without the cheapening of it being in any way sexual? What happened? What did you learn?

The Word for Today

In addition to asking us to examine marriage to be sure that boundaries are clear and sacred, this Word invites us to consider the many ways we adulterate the important relationships in our lives. We can violate this commandment with dishonesty, abuse, and disinterest, and cheapen our relationships with impatience, short-cuts, and meanness. It reminds us that God's people are never to get pleasure at the expense of others and asks us to consider whether our hobbies, jobs, and worries receive more of our time and attention than our marriages, our families, and our closest friends. This Word invites us to explore how we cheapen relationships with manipulation, abuse of power, and hurtful words. It reminds us that there is a real danger in privatizing morality and thinking that something that is not right for others can in some way be right for me.

The Seventh Word warns us that trying to get what we don't have in the wrong ways can cause us to lose what we do have, and often a whole lot more. The problem is not with sex itself. The problem is that when we come to believe that all commitments are subject to our personal desires, to believe that no vow is inviolable and no boundary impermeable, then every decision we make is ultimately selfish and often abusive. Others become less important than getting what we want when we want it, and community, in any meaningful sense of the word, ceases to exist.

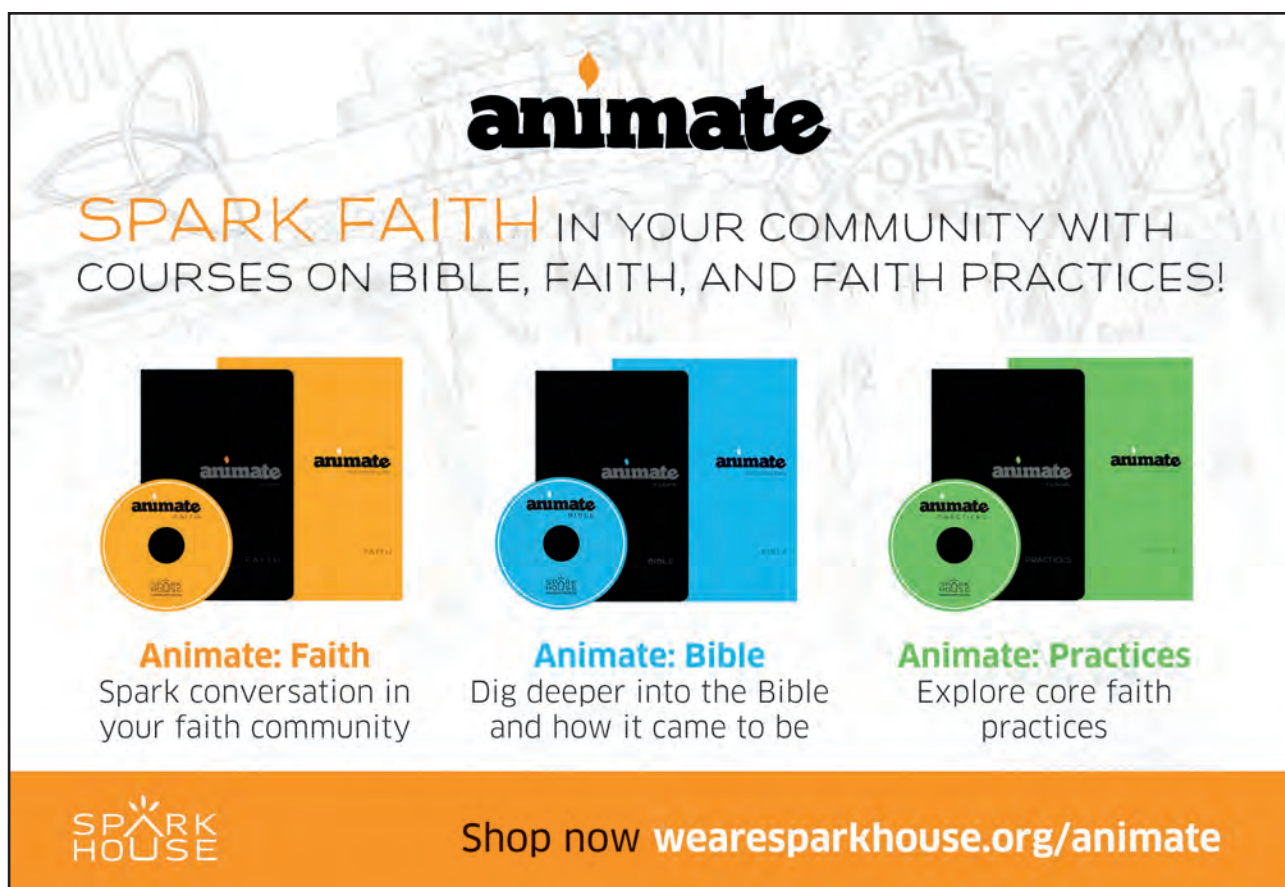
Pause and Reflect: What was most surprising or intriguing to you about this lesson? What is one idea you will take home with you from your study of the Seventh Word?

Praying with the Word Together and Alone

Take a moment to quiet yourself and to breathe deeply. In the quiet, consider those times when you have cheapened an important relationship in any way. How did your behavior affect others and yourself? What was the cost? Ask God to forgive you and show you how to deepen your relationships and be a more faithful person in all your commitments. When you are ready, open your eyes and return to the letter you are writing to God. Add your reflections on this Word. Renew your commitment to your relationship with God and thank God for the special people in your life.

Closing Prayer

Gracious and Faithful God, we thank you for knowing us. We thank you for creating us with the desire to know others through deep and lasting relationships. Help us, O God, to be faithful and true, in marriage and in friendship. Help us not to hurt anyone in order to meet momentary needs. Fill us with joy and gratitude in our relationships every day so that we may be good witnesses in our world. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.



The advertisement features the word "animate" in a bold, black, lowercase font with a small orange flame above the letter 'i'. Below it, the text "SPARK FAITH IN YOUR COMMUNITY WITH COURSES ON BIBLE, FAITH, AND FAITH PRACTICES!" is displayed in a mix of orange and black uppercase letters. Three course sets are shown: "Animate: Faith" with an orange CD and book, "Animate: Bible" with a blue CD and book, and "Animate: Practices" with a green CD and book. Each set includes a CD and a book. The background is a light gray with faint, sketchy outlines of people and text.

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WORDS OF LOVE: HOLD YOUR MARRIAGES SACRED

The Seventh Word

Central Concept

Like all the commandments, today's Word, "You shall not commit adultery," speaks directly to the beloved community as much as it speaks to individuals. Exploring adultery and marriage in Hebrew culture, and the meaning of the partner relationship given by God in Genesis, Chapter Two, will lead us to receive the grace of Jesus' words to the woman "caught in adultery": "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (Jn. 8:11). Self-examination, confession, and standing with the community will send us out to recommit to the deep and faithful relationships to which God calls us.

Come Together

(Activity One—10 minutes, Activity Two—5 minutes)

Activity One: On a piece of newsprint, write "Insights I've gained for me personally from the Ten Words" and on a second write, "Insights I've gained for the community of faith from the Ten Words." As participants arrive, ask them to go to each of the sheets and note at least one response they have from their experience with the study thus far. Read aloud some responses on the "community of faith" sheet, and acknowledge that most people think the commandments are addressed to individuals, but the study author has emphasized the impact of the Ten Words on the community. Ask, "Why might that community focus be surprising to many? How has it changed your ideas about the Ten Words?"

Activity Two: Invite participants to read aloud Exodus 20:14, the Seventh Word, together. It is printed on the first page of this lesson. Comment that even adultery has implications for the community because of the deep, faithful relationships God desires for all of God's people. Tell

the group that the author examines adultery as a community issue and not simply as a personal matter. Invite them to be especially attuned to this today, beginning with their praying of the opening prayer in unison.

Connect (5 minutes)

Present a review of the meaning of adultery and marriage in Hebrew culture, using notes you take from reading the section called "The Seventh Word," paragraphs three through ten. Main points to include and explain are:

Adultery: a property crime since women were the property of their husbands; rules were different for men than women; having multiple wives was a sign of a man's status and wealth; adultery applied to married women because paternity affected economics, honor, and status; the threat of extreme punishment was a powerful deterrent; adultery affects the community. Ask the two excellent questions in "Pause and Reflect" that follow paragraph ten, here.

Marriage: not love matches but economic partnerships based on duty and obligation to family and community; marriage was to be honored; God had a stake in all marriages, which were to be intimate and permanent; marriage was sacred.

Note that the wound today's session addresses is "pain caused by superficial and exploitive relationships." Ask the whole group, "What are some characteristics of superficial and exploitive relationships?"

Consider and Converse (25 minutes)

Direct participants to the description of the meaning of *ezer* on page 72, the Hebrew word for true companion and partner, spoken by God in Genesis, Chapter Two. After giving them a minute or two

to skim through to the "Pause and Reflect" section, lead a discussion of *ezer* relationships with these questions:

1. "What words or phrases describe *ezer* relationships?"
2. In what ways might Christian congregations develop or foster *ezer* relationships?"

Ask participants to find a partner and share with each other responses to the questions in "Pause and Reflect" about *ezer* relationships, at whatever depth they are willing to discuss.

After about five minutes, ask the whole group the author's question, "How is making a commitment to a community of faith like a marriage?"

Read aloud John 8:1–11. The author says, "Jesus' act of grace neither condemns nor excuses [the adulteress's] actions. [Jesus] does not tell her that what she did didn't matter. He does not ask her about the man she was with or if she was coerced. Jesus simply offers grace and tells her to change her life. In every fallen moment of our own lives, Jesus still does [the same]." Form groups of three or four and ask the groups to do the following:

Keep silence and recall a time you did something for which you received grace and then knew you needed to change your life in some way because of it. With or without telling the story (that is your choice), prepare to tell your group how that grace made you feel, and how that change matters to your life now. After each person speaks, you might say these words together, "God's grace is never too late."

Care and Commit (10 minutes)

Provide participants with a copy of the handout on page 111. It includes directions

for contemplation and confession. Invite them to complete the handout on their own and assure them that it will not be shared with others.

Commune and Close (5 minutes)

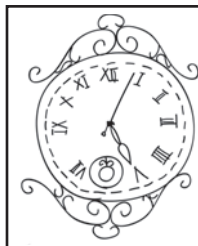
Gather in a circle. Invite three people to be prepared to read one of these three powerful statements from the lesson, each followed by the litany response:

Leader: You shall not commit adultery (Ex. 20:14).

Statement 1: “For the prophets, all adultery is seen as a part of the larger disintegration of the community and the dangerous subjection of morality to personal ego-fulfillment. One who betrays marriage can be expected to betray God (page 73).”

All: “I am the Lord your God . . . ; you shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:1–2).

Statement 2: “Adultery is never simply personal. The prohibition against it is about making sure that no selfish, self-serving choices are allowed to threaten



Lesson Six

Have 30 minutes or less with your group? Read aloud the “Central Concept” and the Word (commandment) for the day, then use the section “Consider and Converse” or “Care and Commit” (for an introspective activity), followed by “Commune and Close.”

community well-being. Anything that begins with a willingness to wound and disregard another, and the guidance of God, rarely ends well (page 73).”

Leader: “Jesus said, ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her’ . . . When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, sir.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again’” (Jn. 8:7b, 9–11).

Statement 3: “The Seventh Word warns us that trying to get what we don’t have in the

wrong ways can cause us to lose what we do have, and often a whole lot more. The problem is not with sex itself. The problem is that when we come to believe that all commitments are subject to our personal desires, to believe that no vow is inviolable and no boundary impermeable, then every decision we make is ultimately selfish and often abusive. Others become less important than getting what we want when we want it, and community, in any meaningful sense of the word, ceases to exist” (page 74).

All: “I am the LORD your God . . . ; you shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:1–2).

Pray the closing prayer in unison.

Preparation for the Next Lesson: Ask participants to bring to next lesson’s session a newspaper/magazine/Facebook/other story that illustrates a deep need locally, nationally, or internationally. Tell them they will be asked to tell the group, very briefly, the location, who is being hurt or is in need, and what is happening to them.

If you are concerned as a leader that some group members will not bring stories, you might collect some extras yourself and bring them along, or privately ask a couple of people in the group to bring one of two extras in case they will be needed. Be prepared to put the stories on a display table so that participants who didn’t bring a story may select one when they arrive.



The Thief, Massimiliano Ligabue

WORDS OF LOVE:
DO NOT STEAL

LESSON SEVEN

THE EIGHTH WORD

Scripture: Exodus 20:15 and Matthew 25:31–46

You shall not steal (Ex. 20:15).

Purpose

The purpose of Lesson Seven is to expand our understanding of stealing beyond the concept of disrespect for personal property.

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, today help us to see the dignity of all human beings and to renew our commitment to their well-being. Fill us with the joy of our faith so that, with our eyes always on you and our hearts filled with your grace, we may learn to give rather than to take. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Opening the Envelope

From our consideration of the violations of heart and property inherent in adultery, our love letter asks us to broaden our view to what it means to take from others in different ways. In this lesson we see God calling us to ponder the variety of ways the prohibition against stealing has been interpreted throughout the history of God's people. Issues of personal property and honor rise to the fore again in this Word. The choices we make either take from or give to others in large and small ways. **The wound addressed in this Word is taking the easy way to get what we want at the expense of others.**

The Eighth Word

There is an old joke about a man on his deathbed who, knowing that his time is drawing near, asks his wife to send for a lawyer and an IRS agent. This she dutifully does. The lawyer and the IRS agent arrive, a bit confused, but willing to help. The dying man asks that one stand on one side of his bed and the other on the other side. After some time standing there in reverent silence, the lawyer asks the dying man why he sent for them. "Well," the man replies, "I'm a Christian and all my life I have tried to live like Jesus. Now I want to die like him, with a thief at either hand."

The headlines are filled with it. Trusted money managers make off with clients' life savings. Struggling youth rob a convenience store of candy, beer, and a few dollars. Celebrities walk out of upscale boutiques and "forget to pay." Government employees

pocket a box of paper clips or a ream of paper to use at home and, before we know it, the tab for these items is \$6 million. Stealing. It is not a concept with which we are *un*familiar, either. Some of us may have downloaded copyrighted material, photocopied a copyrighted resource, or “forgotten” to return a book to the library. We may have fudged a bit on our expense accounts or failed to give our full tithe to the church.

In the early years, the community of God’s people understood this Word to be about much more than the protection of personal property. Personal property was important, but it was never exactly personal. Everything belonged to God. Everything we had was a gift from God and was to be used to further God’s ends alone. The ancestors understood that the land itself belongs only to God and we are temporary residents upon it (Lev. 25:23). Or, at least they understood this concept in theory. Wealth could be seen as a sign of blessing or faithfulness, although the prophets recognized the dangers of this philosophy. Even when wealth was seen as a blessing, it was never given solely for meeting personal needs. Wealth was to be used for the good of the community as a whole. In the biblical worldview, because everything belongs to God, private property is never really seen as a personal possession. It is an entrusted thing for which we have responsibility but not ownership.

It was only after Israel entered the Land of Promise and began to settle into towns that conflicts about personal property, so clearly foreshadowed in this Word, came to the forefront. The Hebrew word used in this Commandment, *ganab*, means “to take from another and to do so by stealth, undercover.” The Yiddish, *gonnif*, refers to a thief, a crook, or someone who is dishonest and exploitative in business. A *gonnif* is someone who is tricky, shady, and untrustworthy. This word also sometimes is used for a person who is very clever, who can outsmart a bureaucracy.¹ As with each of the Words, God asks us to keep in mind that there is a line between what one is able to do and what it is moral to do.

Pause and Reflect: In our day, people sometimes seem to regret getting caught more than they regret committing the crime for which they are nabbed. What role do you think the fear of being punished or exposed plays in deepening a person’s moral vision and conduct?

The Eighth Word is given as an action without a specific object. You shall not steal . . . *what?* We begin to learn the scope of this instruction as we see the multitude of statutes put in place to make its meaning concrete in people’s lives (see particularly Ex. 22:1–15).

We are not to steal personal property, money, or goods. Punishment for stealing always includes restitution and restoration. If restitution and restoration are not possible—for example, if the theft was of food and the food has been eaten—repentance becomes more difficult. There are instances in rabbinic tradition in which the rabbis express ambivalence about this command. For example, if one is forced to thievery for survival due to economic oppression, the command to honor life takes precedence. Still, the old proverb remains in effect: even if you steal what is yours from a thief, you are a bit of a thief yourself.

In the Bible, theft is always a social sin. (This is really the case with all of the actions the Ten Words seek to prohibit.) The Eighth Word is about respect and responsibility for

the good of the neighbor. For this reason, passive inaction also is forbidden. Not only must we not steal property from another, we must not steal by failing to act in the community for the neighbor's good when their welfare is at risk. When the community is called to refuse to steal, it is also called to ensure the economic sufficiency of its neighbors. (Economic sufficiency is the capacity of a person to live with enough to meet daily needs without experiencing undue fear or hardship.)

Patrick Miller explains it this way: "The Eighth Commandment thus does not simply inhibit one from mugging a person on the street or robbing a bank . . . It also serves to effect a more systemic activity to ensure the economic sufficiency of one's neighbor, a systemic activity that is not even vulnerable to likes and dislikes, favoritisms and antipathies, to hostilities and enmity between members of the community."² In other words, this Command requires that the community address structures for the support of the economic needs of all. To fail to do so, or to exploit some for the benefit of others, is seen as theft.

Biblical statutes expand this Word to include the requirement to deal fairly in business. We are prohibited from making money at the expense of others by charging excessive interest and using unfair weights when selling goods. We are told to guard borrowed items and keep them safe (see examples in Ex. 22:7–8; 10–15).

The Word commands that we may not hide our eyes from what causes harm and hardship around us. In the statutes about the necessity to care for a neighbor's straying ox or donkey, we are specifically told that we may not withhold help, we may not hide ourselves, from the needs of our neighbors (Deut. 22:3). Passive inaction in the presence of economic hardship is theft. Martin Luther says it beautifully: "We are commanded to promote and further our neighbor's interests, and when they suffer want, we are to help, share, and lend to both friends and foes."³

Out of this understanding of community responsibility for the economic welfare of all members, we get beautiful laws about gleaning. In these laws, owners must leave a border of unharvested crops so that the poor can come in and glean after the rest of the field is harvested and the workers leave. Gleaning is not charity. It is the right of the poor and it is the duty of the well-off. Owners cannot pass through their fields twice, thereby leaving less for the poor. The fields belong to the farmer, but the entirety of the harvest does not. There are legends of God walking alongside harvesters, plucking out choice vines and grains from their arms to be sure that the poor get not only that which is left behind after harvest, but the good of the land that is their due. The poor are seen as God's agents to remind the wealthy that what they own does not really belong to them. The statutes carefully limit economic activity for theological reasons. Because God does not want poverty (Deut. 15:4) and because God knows that human beings are selfish, ensuring that the needy are always with us (Deut. 15:11), the law is given to help us overcome our selfishness and live as a community of care, respect, and trust.

Pause and Reflect: How does understanding this Word in its broadest and deepest sense address how we attend to the needs of the poor today?

Early in Israel's life, the prohibition against stealing began to be seen in a different and deeper light. Not only about stealing a sack of grain or borrowing a neighbor's ox

① Tithes and Offerings

In the Bible the word *tithe* refers to 10 percent of all that one gains or possesses. This portion of one's resources is to be used to maintain the faith community and its mission. Tithes provide for priests and religious leaders and for benevolences for widows and orphans. Offerings are gifts above and beyond tithes and they are used for special purposes. The concept of the tithe is a concept that demonstrates God's great generosity. Ninety percent of all that is entrusted to us, 100 percent of which still really belongs to God, is to be used as we see fit for ourselves and for the benefit of others. The remaining ten percent is sacred to God and is intended for the religious community. This system is designed to make sure that all members of the community are treated equally and provided for within the community.

without permission, this Word came to be understood much like we understand kidnapping today. We are not to steal people to sell them into slavery, to coerce their work, to oppress them and grow wealthy on their exploited labor. Violation of this use of the Command carried the death penalty (Deut. 24:7).

Rising from Israel's memory of the harshness of slave labor in Egypt and rooted in the story of Joseph's sale into slavery by his brothers, the community quickly came to see this Word as a prohibition against the taking of people and using them for economic advantage. In the beloved community, we may not steal a person's freedom, particularly their livelihood, for our own purposes or economic advancement. To keep this Word, we are not permitted to exploit or treat people as property or as something expendable.

The prophets of Israel recognized how wealth, possessions, and greed, could blind us to the needs of the community. They saw these things, along with shallow worship and disregard for the poor, as marks of a community that had lost its moorings.

The prophet Malachi considered withholding tithes to the community of faith to be theft. In Malachi 3, the prophet reminds the people in no uncertain terms that when we hold back our tithes, we rob God and block the flow of God's blessing and bounty. If we begin to think that our needs are more important than God's plan for the distribution of divine bounty, then trust in God diminishes and community bondedness frays. If we rob God, then it is a short leap to robbing widows of their due and allowing orphans to languish in poverty. This is also true in the reverse. If we rob the poor of that which God desires for them, then we rob God as well. ①

Pause and Reflect: Data show that most Presbyterians give roughly 2.4 percent of their annual income to tithes and benevolences. If we followed the command to tithe and gave 10 percent of our incomes, we would more than quadruple the amount of money we had for the church and its mission. How might a deeper understanding of God's ownership of everything help us to not only address, but welcome, this call to use God's things in God's way?

At the heart of this Word is the ultimate dignity of human life and the sacred bonds of respect that hold human community together. We may not take people's possessions from them. Nor may we take from them that which makes a life of dignity possible. Rabbi Richard Levy writes that this command includes the prohibition against keeping people waiting, because when we keep people waiting, we imply that they are not worth our effort to be on time and we steal their self-esteem. It prohibits not giving credit to an author for his or her ideas. It prohibits misleading flattery, because it steals some of the person's knowledge of the truth. It prohibits gossip, the language of hurt, because gossip steals another's sense of self or their reputation.⁴

Pause and Reflect: Several of the Words (murder, stealing, false witness) invite us to consider the problem of gossip in the community of faith. When we gossip about someone, we not only steal their joy and self-esteem, we also steal the joy and unity of the community itself. Hurtful speech puts the whole community at risk. In what ways have you seen gossip steal from people or damage the community?

Keeping the Eighth Word creates an environment of dignity for all. It has to do with what our choices give to, or take from, others. When we keep this Word, we consider another's well-being, self-esteem, ability to earn a living, sense of security, place in the community, honor, and dignity to be precious and inviolable. Violations of this Word can be active, swift, and aggressive. Or they can be gradual, subtle, and rationalized as common sense. You shall not take from a person that which makes a life of dignity possible. Wow. Stealing someone's dignity is not as easy to dismiss as the small box of paper clips that wound up in your briefcase when you got home from work.

Jesus and the Word: Matthew 25:31–46

In the Sermon on the Mount, ² in which Jesus deals with many of the other commandments and their implications, he does not emphasize this one directly. Why? Perhaps it has to do with the fact that Jesus, throughout his ministry, recognizes the dangers that focusing on property and possessions can pose for the disciples and the broader human family. When Jesus talks with the rich man who has kept the Commandments all his life (Mk. 10), Jesus sees that the rich man's possessions still possess him. Jesus invites him to sell everything and come and follow him. In the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16), Jesus shows us how easy it is for wealth and privilege to own us and blind us to the needs of others. Allowing possessions to blind us to the needs of others (and ourselves) is robbery in the sense of the Eighth Word.

In Matthew 25, the story of the judgment of the nations, a lack of awareness to the needs of others, is raised to the national scale with Jesus' illustration of the sorting of the sheep and the goats. In this story we see that robbing the vulnerable by inattention is not simply a matter of individual choice and morality. Rather, entire nations will be sorted as those who recognize Christ and those who don't.

In this story, Jesus identifies himself with and as the people in need. He tells us that what we do and do not do to each other, we do and do not do to him. The way the vulnerable are treated is the way he is treated. When we see the poor and hurting, we actually see Jesus. The way we treat others, individually and as a society, is the way we treat Jesus himself. It doesn't matter what we say. It matters what we do.

Jesus teaches us that those who are blinded to God's presence in the needy, even though they think they are doing all the right things, are immediately recognizable as having missed the mark completely. They are sent to the punishment they have chosen for themselves by their selfishness and lack of compassion. In Matthew 25, as in the Eighth Word, stealing from the poor defaces God and makes God nearly impossible to see.

Frightening judgment, ³ lies in store for those who, cloaked in self-righteousness, fail to provide aid and support to those in need. When we do not help those in need, we rob people of the dignity of life itself. This Word calls our personal choices into question and it raises questions about community, even church, priorities. We may not judge the ethics of our decisions based on our own needs. In light of God's values, we must ask, does this decision damage others? Does this priority take into account the dignity of everyone in a global community?

²The Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount is found in Matthew, Chapters 5–7, 10, 13, 18, and 24–25.

³Judgment

Judgment refers to moments when the truth of one's choices and the consequences of them become crystal clear.

Pause and Reflect: What are the values that you see guiding our priorities, as a nation or as a church, toward those in need both at home and abroad? How might this Word address public policy?

The Word for Today

In the broad sense of this Word, the list of the ways that we take from others can be a long one. We rob those closest to us of self-esteem and autonomy when we are too controlling or critical. We rob from people when we form cliques that keep others out. We rob from others when, as Rabbi Rachel Mikva points out, we steal people's feelings or opinions by cheating or deception.⁵ We rob when we don't make time for others. We rob when we cut others to size with snide remarks. We rob when we refuse to defend people when they are taunted or discriminated against. We rob when we offer shallow platitudes instead of authentic caring. We rob when we exaggerate our abilities in order to gain an advantage. We rob when we are unkind. We rob when we take advantage of people's trust or innocence. In each of these circumstances in this long list, we violate the Eighth Commandment; we stand in need of grace when we take from someone that which makes a life of dignity possible.

This Word addresses the deep wound, the horrible emotional and spiritual consequences to individuals and society, that is inflicted when we think we can take what we want at the expense of others. It is robbery to think that people can be used to suit our needs. We steal when we think that some people are worthy and others are not. We rob God and wound the One who calls us in love into a different kind of community and a different set of priorities when we think that some of God's children should be respected and others should be ignored.

As we think about this Word for our lives, we must also think of its global implications and how it addresses how we relate to the earth itself. When we take and consume more than we need, while others are deprived of the basic necessities of life, that, in the eyes of God, is robbery. When we decry and punish robbery on a small scale and deny it or reward it on a large scale, that adds deception to the basic sin of *ganaf* (*ganab*) and makes it all the more lamentable. Friedrich Schiller describes this dynamic this way: "It is criminal to steal a purse. It is daring to steal a fortune. It is a mark of greatness to steal a crown. The blame diminishes as the guilt increases."

The hope at the heart of this Word is that we will see each other as real, precious, and a part of the fabric of God's loved creation. We are called to guard the dignity of each person as we would guard Jesus himself. This Word invites us to ask ourselves in our daily lives what we give to the world instead of what we take from it.

Pause and Reflect: What was most surprising or intriguing to you about this lesson? What is one idea you will take with you?

Praying with the Word Together or Alone

Take a moment to breathe deeply and quiet your running inner dialogue. Stop for a moment and breathe. When space opens up inside, rest there for a moment. If thoughts come rushing back in, just let them go. If the thoughts are important, they will come back to you at a more appropriate time. When you are ready, ask God to lift to your awareness a moment when you felt that the dignity of who you are as a human being has been recognized. Sit with that feeling for a moment. Ask yourself how you think others feel when they are with you? Do you lift up or tear down? Ask God to help you create an environment in which all with whom you come in contact receive honor and dignity from you. Ask God to help you be aware of the times you steal from others and to help you find ways to give love and esteem instead. After a time, open your eyes and turn to the love letter you are writing to God. Add any reflections, confessions, or insights from this lesson.

Closing Prayer

Gracious and bountiful God, we thank you for everything that you give us. Help us to see that all that we have is given to further the work of your kingdom. Help us to follow the example of Jesus and open our eyes to the needs of others. Help us to see how we casually rob from you and others and help us to live lives transformed by your loving Word. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

WORDS OF LOVE: DO NOT STEAL

The Eighth Word

Central Concept

“You shall not steal,” the Eighth Word, has broader and more significant implications for God’s beloved community than simply the protection of personal property. Exploring this biblical imperative will lead us to face our collective responsibility to care for the whole world. We will be called to examine our lives and our congregational contexts for vulnerabilities and a deeper response to the understanding that everything we have is a gift from God.

Come Together (5 minutes)

Hang on a wall or an easel a piece of newsprint with “Important things that can be stolen” written in the middle. As they enter, invite folks to contribute two or three things to the list on the newsprint.

On the first page of this lesson, find the Eighth Word from Exodus 20:15 and read it together.

Pray the opening prayer in unison.

Connect (Activity One—10 minutes; Activity Two—5 minutes)

Activity One: Invite participants to summarize briefly for the group the gist of the newspaper, magazine, Facebook, or other story they brought to illustrate a deep local, national, or international need. Suggest that they use this format: location, who is being hurt or is in need, what is happening to them. Point out to participants that this is not a time to offer solutions; it is a time to acknowledge the breadth of need in the world. (Leader: If you worry that some participants might not bring a story, set up a table and display the stories you collected since the last session, or that you asked others to bring. Check with participants as they arrive and invite those without stories to select one from the display as they enter.)

Activity Two: Note that the wound being addressed in this session is “taking the easy way to get what we want at the expense of others.” Ask participants to name something they think is being done publicly at the expense of others. Encourage short answers with no explanations—your goal is a breadth of ideas.

Consider and Converse (25 minutes)

With a clear time frame, and from the following options, choose one to three important questions you would like to explore in the lesson section “The Eighth Word.” Also consider the author’s “Pause and Reflect” options and your own sense of what will connect fruitfully with your group and context. Because you might use smaller groups for any of these conversations, there are suggestions that call for more trust or intimacy during sharing and fewer conversation partners to help improve the depth of conversation.

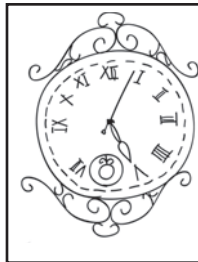
1. (15 minutes) Using the dramatic script of Matthew 25:31–46 on page 111, invite group members to prepare and present this story to the group. Discuss it as follows:
 - a. According to this story, entire nations are judged by their care for, or inattention to, the needs of the poor and hurting in whom Jesus is seen and served. How do you evaluate our nation in this regard? Your community? Your congregation? Who is slipping through the cracks of the social system? Who is invisible to the average citizen? Who is being intentionally denied care and why?
 - b. Those who are found to be neglectful are completely surprised by that assessment. What might be the reasons for being caught unaware in inaction? Consider what might be

holding you, or your congregation, back from action and advocacy.

- c. In the parable, the King clearly recognizes those who have responded to deep need. Name the ways your congregation and you reach out to show compassion to those with great physical, mental, and spiritual needs in your community; how do you recognize Jesus in the suffering?
 - d. From “Pause and Reflect,” page 80, read the introduction and ask both questions.
2. (5 Minutes) (Preferably in pairs) “Even when wealth was seen as a blessing, it was never given solely for meeting personal needs. Wealth was to be used for the good of the community as a whole. In the biblical worldview, because everything belongs to God, private property is never really seen as a personal possession. It is an entrusted thing for which we have responsibility but not ownership” (page 80). Ask participants to consider and discuss, “What are some of the ways you exercise your responsibility for—i.e., make choices about—your resources?”
 3. (10 minutes) Explain that the author includes our practice of stewardship in our congregations as one possible way of stealing. Note that she uses failing to tithe as an example (page 82). Point out that she reminds us that the prophet Malachi “considered withholding tithes to the community of faith to be theft” (page 82). See also the sidebar definition of tithes and offerings on page 82. Either read aloud, or invite participants to skim, the paragraph “The Prophets of Israel . . .” (page 82). Ask “What point is the author making? How do you respond to the view that ‘. . . when we hold back our tithes, we rob God and block the flow of God’s

blessing and bounty'? What 'blessing and bounty' have you received from the practice of giving to the church?"

4. (10 minutes) Review the definitions of "steal" in the paragraph at the bottom of page 79 and top of page 80. Have participants consider the following about definitions of stealing: What aspect seems most prevalent to you in today's world? What aspect most frustrates you? Seems most dishonest? Has the potential to bring the most harm to the vulnerable? What examples do you see in your community, or the nation, of disregard for the "line between what one is able to do and what it is moral to do", and how might you, and/or the church, address the abuses you see?
5. (10 minutes) (Preferably in threes) "We are not to steal personal property, money, or goods. Punishment for stealing always includes restitution and restoration" (page 80). Have participants consider the following: Your child steals a candy bar. A teen steals your son's school lunch. Your friend steals a library book. Your colleague manipulates the financial records at work for the benefit of all employees. What might restitution and restoration look like in any of these situations and who is responsible for taking those steps?
6. (5 minutes) (In silence) "The Word commands that we may not hide our eyes from what causes harm and hardship around us. . . . Passive inaction in the presence of economic hardship is theft" (page 81). Ask: "What feels too overwhelming to bear, or too big to address, in your own community? Nearest city? State? The nation?" Say, "Pick one location. Pick one thing. Name it. Write it down. Commit to coming back to the thing you choose thinking more about it at home and pondering what God might have in mind for you."



Lesson Seven

Have 30 minutes or less with your group? Read aloud the "Central Concept" and the Word (commandment) for the day, then select one or two of the seven options in "Consider and Converse," especially number one, three, or four.

7. (5 minutes) "In the beloved community, we may not steal a person's freedom, particularly their livelihood, for our own purposes or economic advancement. To keep this Word, we are not permitted to exploit or treat people as property or as something expendable" (page 82). Ask: "In what situations might people be in a position of responsibility over the livelihood of others? In what ways might this prohibition apply to you? To your congregation?"

Care and Commit (10 minutes)

Invite participants to turn to "The Word for Today" section at the end of the lesson. Decide whether reading silently and to yourselves or aloud and together will work best for your group and read the first three paragraphs, a long list of ways we rob others or commit robbery. Tell participants to watch for something as they read that speaks to them personally—a "call-out" of a practice that is all too familiar, or an idea of which they might have been only vaguely aware—that they now are more able and willing to recognize in themselves. Suggest that they read all the way through the section before they choose something, because the examples move from local to global situations.

After everyone has chosen, sit together in silence and ask everyone to consider how the things they have chosen affect the lives of others, and how they affect themselves. Suggest that they try to notice the feelings that arise, and discern what they need and what they hope for. Pray together for discernment, clarity, and open spirits "to allow God to change your hearts and

minds, and the hearts and minds of others. Ask yourselves, how you will live differently because of your newfound awareness?"

Commune and Close (5 minutes)

Gather in a circle. Invite two participants ahead of time to be ready to read these two quotes from the lesson:

Statement 1: "We may not judge the ethics of our decisions based on our own needs. In light of God's values, we must ask, does this decision damage others? Does this priority take into account the dignity of everyone in a global community?" (page 83).

Leader: "I am the LORD your God . . . ; you shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:1–2).

Statement 2: "The hope at the heart of this Word is that we will see each other as real, precious, and a part of the fabric of God's loved creation. We are called to guard the dignity of each person as we would guard Jesus himself. This Word invites us to ask ourselves in our daily lives what we give to the world instead of what we take from it" (page 84).

Leader: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Jn. 20:2–3).

Pray the closing prayer in unison or led by one voice.



Gossip, David Obi

WORDS OF LOVE:
SPEAK TRUTHFULLY

LESSON EIGHT

THE NINTH WORD

Scripture: Exodus 20:16, Deuteronomy 5:20, and Matthew 12:36–37

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor (Ex. 20:16).

Purpose

The purpose of Lesson Eight is to consider the dual emphases of this Word: the importance of a trustworthy judicial system and the necessity of basic honesty for the stability of community.

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, our One and Only, thank you for bringing us to this moment. Open our hearts to receive your Word for us today. Help us to live as truthful people, mindful that you are the Way, the Truth, and our Life. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Opening the Envelope

After diving deeply into the amazing love letter of the Ten Words and realizing how profoundly loved, valued, and cherished we are, it is natural to open our eyes to the community of God's beloved in a new light. God's arrangement of the Ten Words demonstrates this well. A deeper understanding of our direct relationship with God and its responsibilities leads us to stop, rest, and reorganize our lives around that relationship. With our God-centered lives we honor all life and vow not to assume God's power to take or diminish it. True and deep relationships with God and the community of faith help us commit to marriage. We seek to show the same commitment in our intimate relationships that God shows to us. From there we see that we cannot commit to relationships without honoring our neighbors' property and their dignity. Once we have these concepts clearly in our minds, the love letter asks us to consider how committing to honesty and integrity of speech will protect the institutions and stability of the community. **The wound at the heart of this Word is the betrayal and erosion of personal and institutional trust.**

The Ninth Word

The summer that I was six, my family piled into our old, un-air-conditioned Pontiac and headed north from Greenville, Alabama, to visit my father's brother and his family in Des Moines, Iowa. It was a hot and grueling two-day drive, made all the more

tedious by my parents' anxiety. I had been desperately ill a few months before. My mother claims, to this day, that I was spared due to a bargain she made with God for my life. At any rate, I felt fine, but my parents had not gotten over the scare.

When we pulled into the driveway of my uncle's home, my cousin Arthur and two of his neighbor friends were playing in the yard. One neighbor, also age six, was named Jacie. She had a brown helmet haircut and wore denim shorts and a Mickey Mouse tee shirt. The other little girl, Muffet, was blond and wore a pink gingham romper. She had pink Keds and little white socks with gingham trim. I distrusted her instantly and, as it happened, that distrust was well-placed.

All was well until Muffet turned on the garden hose and soaked me to the bone. I ran into the house screaming. It was an unfair and unprovoked attack, my little soul knew, and something had to be done to put things right!

When I was dry, my mother and I headed downstairs to find the other parents, my cousin Arthur, and Jacie in the living room. Jacie was crying uncontrollably. There was no sign of Muffet. As it turned out, when asked who had turned the hose on me, Arthur had said that Jacie had done it; Muffet, who looked like she had hands that would never touch a hose in her life, had skipped home in her little pink Keds.

"But Muffet did it," I said.

I will never forget what happened next. The adults believed Arthur. A look of helplessness passed between Jacie and me. We did not know how to defend ourselves against a lie.

Over the years I have thought often of this story and realized that, while that little family tribunal all those years ago was certainly not a court of law, giving false witness can set in motion dynamics that cut to the heart of relationships, community, and the fabric that holds society together.

The Ninth Word addresses false witness. How do we hold together as a community if we cannot trust the testimony of others? At this early moment in the history of God's people, God knew that a stable society must have a system of justice upon which people can stake their lives. God recognized that, for a community to stand, there must be a legal system, a bedrock of truth and honesty, upon which its members can depend.

The original understanding of the Ninth Word focused exclusively on the legal system and dealt with what we call perjury today. The Ninth Word states that God's people are not to lie in court under oath; the community's survival depends on it.

In the Exodus and Deuteronomy versions of the Ten Words, two different Hebrew words are chosen to express the fundamental principle of "bearing false witness." They are similar and are sometimes considered synonymous. There are, however, nuances to their meaning.

In Deuteronomy, the Hebrew phrase used is *eid shav*. *Eid shav* means "empty," "vain," or "lying," and includes speech that is an outright lie and also speech that is deceptive,

frivolous, or designed to make one look better. The meaning is similar to the concept in the Third Word where we are warned to avoid vain speech about God.

In Exodus, the phrase is *eid sheker*. In other instances where this Hebrew phrase occurs in the Old Testament, it is translated not as “false witness” but as “fraudulent” or “wrongfully injurious” words or witness. We are not to speak words that are false (for instance, “I wasn’t there, your honor” when you were there). We are also not to speak words that cause wrongful harm or injury to our neighbors (“They cheated me before; they are cheats.”). The difference is subtle but fascinating. Lying outright is wrong and so is using our words to damage the reputation or livelihood of our neighbors.

The rabbis taught that the Ninth Word warned that we are not to undermine the fairness of the justice system by making others look bad or seem small, and thereby gain unfair status or advantage over them. *Eid shav*: don’t lie or use empty and deceitful words in court. *Eid sheker*: Do not utter wrongfully injurious words that harm the heart and take people’s power and self-esteem from them.

Pause and Reflect: Think of an example that illustrates the difference between *eid shav* and *eid sheker*. Name a time when you said something that caused needless injury to someone and a time when you experienced being on the receiving end of a wrongfully injurious word.

It is important to notice that the focus of this Command is false witness (*eid*) and not false testimony (*eidut*). To be a “false witness” is to claim as truth something that you do not know firsthand to be true. Today we get our legal prohibition against hearsay testimony from this concept. Even if what one testifies to is perfectly true and has been learned from unimpeachable sources, if it was not witnessed personally, it is considered “false witness” and is forbidden. “False testimony” is stating that something that is not true is true.

To help us understand the difference between the terms, let’s look at a silly example: your dog ate your homework. If you didn’t do your homework and you tell your teacher that your dog ate it, you give false testimony. Why is it false testimony? You didn’t do your homework and you lied to your teacher by blaming your dog. If you did your homework, then put it in your backpack to take to school and turn it in, but it wasn’t in your backpack when you reached in to get it, and you remember that you saw your dog acting funny by your backpack, hacking and coughing, and you tell your teacher that your dog ate your homework, but you didn’t see your dog actually eat it, you give false witness. Why is it false witness? You did not see the act and for all you know, your little brother could have done it.

The motivation behind the prohibition against false witness is to protect the innocent person who is wrongly accused. Then as now, it was considered better for a hundred guilty people to go free than for one innocent person to be wrongfully convicted.

The concern for the protection of the innocent grew out of special concern for the poor and the most vulnerable in society. There was an ever-present danger that the legal system could be subverted by false witnesses. Rules were set in place that at least two witnesses had to testify in agreement in order for charges to be sustained. The fear was

that out of prejudice, or to gain some kind of economic advantage, people could be defamed by the unscrupulous in frivolous or unsupported lawsuits.

Wage theft was one example of an attempt to take economic advantage. It was not uncommon for wealthy bosses to claim that workers did substandard work in order to not pay them everything they were owed for completed work. Where I live in California, wage theft is still a problem. Supervisors have been shown to change farm workers' time cards and production numbers to such an extent that workers essentially work half a day for free. Workers have little recourse against bosses who lie. The prohibition against false witness sought to stop this kind of theft and injustice.

Pause and Reflect: How do you see the norm of truthfulness in general, and in the legal system in specific, shifting over time? Who seems to bear the greatest burden for a lack of truthfulness?

Throughout the statutes in Exodus and Deuteronomy, caution is taken to protect the poor in the justice system (Deuteronomy 24:10–25:3; Exodus 23:1–9). Those who have no recourse or ability to negotiate the power structures, especially widows, orphans, and immigrants, are mentioned for protection. Great concern is expressed that their rights not be trampled on by prejudice passed off as truth. The statutes affirm that false witness against the vulnerable is such an important societal sin that, when the poor appeal an unjust verdict, the case is argued directly to God who serves as their judge. The legal code makes clear that God will not acquit the one who withholds, through misleading statements and false charges, justice from the poor.

The ancestors believed that all injustice is rooted in some kind of falsehood that is accepted by the powerful as fact (others are lazy, they don't belong here, the land belongs to me, and so on). The concern was that lies could be told that made injustice seem, somehow, justified and, therefore, give cover for abuse to continue; in extreme cases, injustice could be called necessary or even good. To root out falsehood from the legal system and expose the elemental lies and prejudices was to ensure justice for all.

Perhaps nowhere is the importance of the Ninth Word seen as clearly as in the case of capital crimes. There were many such crimes set forth in the Law. Procedures in Deuteronomy spell out clearly, and in minute detail, the processes that must be followed, and then followed again, in these cases. Some suggest that these rules were so onerous as to make execution all but impossible. Rooted in the honoring of life and the fierce prohibition against murder, the community was concerned about what might be called judicial murder or executing an innocent person.

With the Ninth Word, God recognizes that allowing people, who have the tendency and capacity to lie for self-interest, to hold life in their hands was dangerous business. This Word warns that such judgments must be made with the utmost care and honesty. Then, as now, it was sometimes difficult to sort prejudice from truth. An inviolate commitment to keeping the spirit of firsthand truthfulness was and is crucial for the well-being of, and justice in, community.

Rabbi Rachel Mikva gives a case in point in the story of “Leo Frank, a Jew raised in Brooklyn, who managed his uncle’s pencil factory in Atlanta, Georgia.”¹

When a fourteen-year-old employee, Mary Phagan, was found murdered in the factory basement in 1913, Frank was arrested for the crime. The key witness for the prosecution was himself suspected of the murder, and there was no real evidence against Frank, but he was convicted and sentenced to death. While many observers remained unconvinced of his guilt, local sentiment ran against this highly educated northern Jew, and all legal appeals were denied. After the persistent pleas of Frank’s wife, Lucille, the governor commuted the sentence to life in prison. It cost Governor Slaton his political career, but still could not save Leo Frank’s life. On August 16, 1915, a mob broke into the jail and lynched him.²

The rabbis knew well the dangers of self-protection, prejudice, and avarice that reside barely domesticated in the human heart. They knew, too, how crucial it would be to safeguard the legal system from those vices. Throughout the Torah, the prophets, and the wisdom writings of the Old Testament, God warns the people not to deal falsely with each other or to lie to one another (see Lev. 19:11; Ps. 35:11; and Prov. 12:19) .

My father was a judge, and I remember from early childhood his teaching me to tell the truth and not exaggerate. “If you don’t know for sure, if you did not see it yourself, if you cannot put your hand on the Bible and swear, just don’t say it,” he told me again and again. Telling the truth must be at the heart of the legal system and at the heart of society. “According to the Talmud, the first question that we will be asked in the World to Come is ‘Were you honest in your world?’”³

While the sanctity of the legal system is to be inviolate, the Torah does not prohibit all lying. The midwives Puah and Shiprah lie to Pharaoh’s minions to save the baby Moses and other Hebrew children (Ex. 1:15–20). Rahab lies to the King’s men to protect Joshua and the others when the soldiers come looking for spies (Josh. 2). These stories and others show that God’s people have the freedom to lie in order to save a life, to avoid injury, to make peace, to maintain modesty, to protect someone from being taken advantage of, or to keep harmony in the family.

Telling the truth is a form of loving one’s neighbor. In the tradition of the Hebrew scriptures, however, telling the truth can be nuanced. The question is asked, “What words does one say to a bride?” The School of Shammai says, “The bride is described as she is.” The School of Hillel says, “Every bride is described as beautiful and graceful.” The rabbis agreed with Hillel.

The issue at heart is how the well-being of others is affected by our words. Philosophers, theologians, and ethicists throughout the centuries have wrestled with when, and if, it is ever appropriate to lie. It is a struggle because even when the lie may be deemed ethical, or even moral (such as when the Nazis asked neighbors if there were Jews in

the neighborhood, and neighbors lied to protect neighbors), there is still something in us, and the community, that is diminished by falsity. This is especially true when falsity causes injury to another in physical, economical, or emotional ways.

In addition, this Word prohibits all slander, gossip, and manipulation through speech. It recognizes the power of language to wound and to set in motion dynamics that cannot be reversed. The Old Testament teaches that words have power that is not easy to harness. Once words of blessing or cursing are uttered, they cannot be recalled. The words are out there, and they are doing things. We see this in the story of Jacob wresting his father's blessing from his brother Esau (Gen. 27). The old man was horrified when the deception came to light, but he could not turn back the words once they were spoken. This is especially true of the words of prophecy. Once a prophecy is spoken, new realities are set in motion that cannot be reversed. Words spoken cannot be unspoken.

Pause and Reflect: Think of a time when words were spoken that set consequences in motion for you—consequences that could not be turned around.

Lying can do grave harm in court, in the public sphere, and in personal relationships. Sisela Bok says, “Deceit and violence—these are the two forms of deliberate assault on human beings.”⁴ The Ninth Word would add to that assessment that society itself collapses when lies are accepted as truth and facts become relative and engineered in order to manipulate. When a half-truth is spun to deceive, it becomes a lie and much destruction invariably follows.

Jesus and the Word: Matthew 12:36–37

The New Testament provides many examples of the dangers of lying in general (see the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1–11) and lying in court in specific (see the trial of Jesus and the difficulty of securing two witnesses who agreed in Mk. 14:53–65 and Matt. 26:57–67.). In John's Gospel, on the night of his betrayal, Jesus comforts his confused and frightened disciples by reminding them that he himself is truth. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6).

Jesus' short teachings on fruitfulness, treasure, the heart, and speech in Matthew 12 reflect the interconnectedness between thoughts and words, and the ways our thoughts and words affect others and the community. Jesus reminds his followers that in the end we will all be held accountable for our words. In light of the Ninth Word, what we say, and sometimes what we don't say, is who we are.

Pause and Reflect: What are times when staying silent can hurt someone? What about times when staying silent can be a positive sign of character?

Making truthful statements does not necessarily make us morally good. Ephesians 4 reminds us that the truth must also be spoken in love. Truth hurled as a weapon at a loved one or an enemy is never appropriate. The courage to face the truth can make us free (Jn. 8:32) but the truth should never be used as an excuse to demean, demoralize, or manipulate others.

The Word Today

In the 2003 movie *Something's Gotta Give*, Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton play the two protagonists. The “moment of truth” scene occurs outside a restaurant in New York City after Keaton has run into Nicholson there with a much younger woman. Believing that she and the Nicholson character are in a relationship, Keaton’s character is devastated by what she sees, and she runs out of the restaurant. Flustered and confused, he follows her outside. At one point in their discussion, he says, “I have always told you some version of the truth.” To which she replies, “The truth doesn’t have versions.” Indeed.

We live in a time when words are manipulated in ways that they have rarely been manipulated before. People in power choose a narrative and repeat it over and over again until others accept it as truth—whether or not the narrative is in any way factual. The result is a breakdown of the structures of society itself and a frightening polarization of people and their opinions. If a news report does not please us, we decide it is untrue. If science threatens our economics, we decide it is hocus-pocus. If journalists report on events that threaten the power structures, they are jailed. Hannah Arendt, in her 1951 book *Origins of Totalitarianism*, wrote of Germany in the Third Reich,

In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and nothing was true The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that, under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness.⁵

This is exactly the human tendency that the Ninth Word seeks to address.

Pause and Reflect: Former Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously said, “Everyone is entitled to [their] own opinion, but not to [their] own facts.”⁶ Some people today suggest that we live in a “post fact” culture. Phrases that have entered our national life like “fake news” or “alternative facts” help us see how nuanced our understanding of truth and truth-telling have become. In what ways do you see the Ninth Word addressing this phenomenon?

Beyond the courtroom and the political arena, this Word calls us to inner thoughtfulness. It invites us to be aware of how we speak and the consequences of our words. Early in our religious tradition, the family of faith came to see how powerfully damaging and sinful the habit of gossip could be. Leonard Felder, a nationally known psychotherapist, tells a famous Hasidic story about the dangers of gossip.

In this tale a student has been saying hurtful things and spreading untrue gossip about his teacher. But eventually the student feels guilty,

goes to the teacher, and asks for forgiveness. The teacher suggests, “If you want to make amends for what you’ve done, I recommend taking several feather pillows, cutting them open, and letting the wind disperse the feathers.” The student does as he was told and returns to the teacher, who says calmly to the student, “Now, there’s one more step. Go out and gather up all the feathers.” The student replies, “But how can I do that? It is impossible. The winds have scattered them in every direction.” The teacher explains, “Now you’re beginning to learn about the power of words. Once you have started or repeated a hurtful rumor and it spreads in all directions, it is very difficult to try to undo all the damage.”⁷

The Ninth Word asks us to consider how we lie in active and passive ways. When we withhold information, is that a lie? When we deceive just a little, is that a lie? When we accept the lies of those in power, are we accomplices? When we say “Fine,” when we are asked how we are after a fight with our spouse, are we lying? When we make excuses for others, are we lying? There are so many ways to violate the spirit of this Word that there is not enough paper to collect them and write them down!

The bottom line is that lying always imprisons us in an alternate reality that is exhausting and ultimately futile to maintain. The Judeo-Christian tradition teaches that finding a way to live lovingly, truthfully, and with an eye on justice, while at the same time recognizing our power to wound, produces a way of life that is filled with blessing and peace of mind. When we commit to truthfulness, we live without the constant worry of somehow being found out; we can move from defensiveness to openness. Keeping this Word is about finding balance, integrity, and consistency between our inner and outer worlds.

Sometimes, we even speak lies to and about ourselves. The inner dialogue that tells us we are fat, ugly, old, dumb, is also a violation of this Command. The eye-roll we make when someone compliments us, the facial expression or tone of voice that tears others down, the ways we exclude others from our churches and groups, all of these are lies lived out, and all damage us and our community in sometimes irreparable ways.

Living mindfully and honestly in a world in which many no longer value the truth, or believe in it, is hard. Yet the truth is the call at the heart of this command. God, who gives it to us, loves us and wants us to live in peace and harmony with each other and with God.

Pause and Reflect: What was most surprising or intriguing to you about this lesson? What is one idea you will take with you?

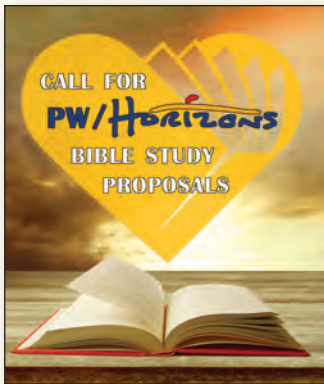
Praying with the Word Together or Alone

Take a moment to quiet yourself and breathe deeply. Notice any tension or feelings that the lesson may have raised in you. Just notice. Don’t try to manage the feelings or fix

them. Let your feelings turn into thoughts directed at God and share with your Divine Love-Letter-Writer all that you are thinking and feeling. When you are ready, pray this prayer. Turn to the love letter you have been writing to God and write your reflections and thanksgivings for the deep beauty of this Word.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, your word to us is always faithful and true. We thank you. Jesus, our heart and life, you are the way and the truth for us. Help us, Lord, to live in the truth. Help us to be mindful of the words we speak. Make us trustworthy witnesses so that your love and truth can spread from us as a sweet fragrance in our troubled world. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.



The 2020 Presbyterian Women Churchwide Coordinating Team/Board of Directors Bible study committee will meet in March 2020 to choose the author and theme of the 2023–2024 PW/*Horizons* Bible study. Potential authors are invited to propose a theme and submit an outline and sample lesson (one of the nine lessons that will make up the study) to the committee for their consideration. Authors must demonstrate knowledge of the Bible and related writings, knowledge of and commitment to Reformed theology, experience teaching Bible study, clear understanding of women's issues in the wider church and in the PC(USA), commitment to and use of inclusive language, active membership in the church, and working knowledge of Presbyterian Women. Deadline for proposals is January 31, 2020.

Contact Betsy Ensign-George, PW associate editor, for more information: Betsy.Ensign-George@pcusa.org; 844/797-2872; or 100 Witherspoon St., Louisville, KY 40202-1396.

WORDS OF LOVE: SPEAK TRUTHFULLY

The Ninth Word

Central Concept

Bearing false witness has implications for our personal relationships and our communities. Exploring the breadth of meaning in the Ninth Word may help us examine our own practices and commitments more carefully. It may also help us recognize and disavow lying as we recommit to the God who desires love, peace, and justice for the beloved community and the whole world.

Come Together (5 minutes)

On the first page of this lesson find the Ninth Word from Exodus 20:16, and read it together.

Pray the opening prayer in unison.

Connect (Activity One—10 minutes; Activity Two—5 minutes)

Activity One: There are hundreds of verses about truth and lying in the Bible; I've made a list of many that the author refers to in this lesson. Find the list, in order of the verses' use in the lesson, on page 112. So that everyone can respond to each statement, invite them to stand in an open space and find a partner. Read the selections aloud in order and ask the same question after each one: What do you learn about truth from this statement or story? Allow one minute for each response, thirty seconds per person in each pair. Give people time to find a new partner before each new statement. Invite participants with limited mobility to remain seated and have others come to them. (To fit this activity to a shorter timeframe, select a limited number of statements, or provide a copy of the statements to pairs who read them and respond to ones they choose.)

Activity Two: Note that the wound this lesson addresses is "the betrayal and erosion of personal and institutional trust." Ask participants to name either an action that has eroded their trust in someone (do not name the person) or an action that has

eroded their trust in an institution. Encourage short answers with no explanations, so that many actions can be heard.

Consider and Converse (25 minutes)

Divide participants into four groups, each with a different task. Ask them to follow the instructions and to be prepared to tell the whole group some of the results of their work.

Group 1: "False witness" in Exodus and Deuteronomy

1. In the lesson, find the section called "The Ninth Word." Skim from the paragraph that begins with "The original understanding . . ." (page 90) through the second "Pause and Reflect."
2. Identify the difference between "false witness" and "false testimony." Define each in your own words.
3. Which of the two terms is the focus of the Ninth Word and what did this prohibition most intend to do? What rules were put in place to protect the poor and most vulnerable in society?
4. Respond to the questions in "Pause and Reflect" about norms of truthfulness (page 92). Try to think of specific examples from your experience and observation.
5. Be prepared to report to the whole group:
 - a. Your definitions of "false witness" and "false testimony"
 - b. One or two examples of ways in which wealth and social status might be advantageous, and/or ways the poor and most vulnerable might be at a disadvantage within the legal system

Group 2: The statutes in Exodus and Deuteronomy

1. Divide among you:
 - a. In the lesson, find the section called "The Ninth Word." Skim from the

paragraph that begins with "Throughout the statutes in Exodus and Deuteronomy . . ." (page 92) through the paragraph that begins "Rabbi Rachel Mikva . . ."

- b. Read Exodus 23:1–9 and Deuteronomy 24:8–22.
2. Choose two to three examples from the Exodus and Deuteronomy passages of statutes that protect the poor and seem relevant to issues that might come before today's courts.
 3. Read aloud the paragraph that begins "The ancestors believed . . ." What from this paragraph still rings true or relevant to you and why? What examples illustrate your assessment?
 4. The author uses the example of the importance of the Ninth Word in capital crimes and claims, "An inviolate commitment to keeping the spirit of firsthand truthfulness was and is crucial for the well-being of, and justice in, community." Name some other situations in which you believe firsthand truthfulness is paramount for, and lack of it is devastating to, justice.
 5. Be prepared to report to the whole group:
 - a. Your examples from Exodus and Deuteronomy of statutes that protect the poor and seem relevant to issues that might come before today's courts
 - b. A couple of current issues to which the Ninth Word seems crucially important for justice

Group 3: Lying and relationship

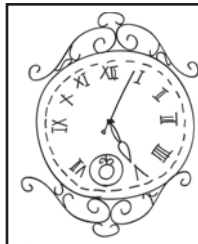
1. Turn toward the end of the lesson section called "The Ninth Word" and skim from "The rabbis knew . . ." (page 93) through the end of the section.
2. "God warns the people not to deal falsely with each other or to lie to one another"

(page 93). What are some of the consequences to relationships when lies are told? When lies are discovered?

3. When might it ever be appropriate to lie? Briefly tell of a time you judged lying to be appropriate and why. "It is a struggle because even when the lie may be deemed ethical or even moral, . . . there is still something in us, and the community, that is diminished by falsity." How might even lies that are deemed ethical and moral diminish a community?
4. "Deceit and violence—these are the two forms of deliberate assault on human beings" (page 94). Where do you believe deceit is most prevalent in today's society and why? How might one confront deceit? What other Christian values might one need to honor in one's choices and demeanor?
5. Be prepared to report to the whole group:
 - a. Examples of the consequences of lies to personal relationships
 - b. Examples of situations in which it might be appropriate to lie, and the risks to community
 - c. Examples of ways to confront deceit, while bound by our commitments to Christian community

Group 4:

1. Read Matthew 12:36–37 aloud, then turn to "Jesus and the Word" and skim the section (page 94). Read the scripture referenced.
2. Make a list of five or six dangers of lying. Then make a list of five or six dangers of lying in court.
3. "In light of the Ninth Word, what we say, and sometimes what we don't say, is who we are" (page 94). Apply this to your beliefs about lying: What might lying say about who we are? What might refusing to speak say about who we are?
4. The "Pause and Reflect" in this section asks us to relate our silence to justice. Name examples of times when staying silent can hurt someone else and times



Lesson Eight

Have 30 minutes or less with your group? Read aloud the "Central Concept" and the Word (commandment) for the day, then use the section "Consider and Converse" or "Connect" Activity One, followed by "Care and Commit."

when staying silent might reflect our Christian character.

5. Be prepared to report to the whole group:
 - a. Your thoughts both on what lying and on refusing to speak say about who we are
 - b. Examples of times when staying silent can hurt someone else and examples of times when staying silent might reflect our Christian character.

Hear from each of the small groups.

Ask: "From this work, what new insights do you have into the application of the Ninth Word to individuals and to justice in our world?"

Care and Commit (10 minutes)

In this lesson the author explicitly invites us to apply the Ninth Word, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," to the troubling discord, animosity, and division present in the United States at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century. No one can deny that bearing "false witness," lying, is very near the center of the national debate. And that ". . . [T]he dual emphases of this [Ninth] Word: the importance of a trustworthy judicial system and the necessity of basic honesty for the stability of community" (page 89), as the author describes them, compel us to self-examination and spiritual soul-searching. There are no illusions of unanimity in the Christian church about what is happening and what to do. But, if we trust the purpose of faithful Bible study in the beloved community and our call to treat every other human being with respect and to speak the truth in love, I invite us to that self-reflection and spiritual soul-searching now.

(Offer the directions one at a time and provide an appropriate amount of silence for reflection between each. If you as leader participate, you will have a sense of how much silence to leave between each step.)

1. Find a quiet space at your seat or where available.
2. Quickly skim "The Word for Today," page 95, for "trigger" words (words that raise your anxiety and arouse strong feelings in response). Sit with the words and feelings. What exactly are they for you?
3. Based on the nine Words we have explored to date, ask yourself what lies you might be living out that damage you and the community. Ask yourself if the voices you trust are the voices that protect the poor and most vulnerable in society.
4. Ask yourself if you are willing to listen intently, refrain from hurling truth as a weapon, seek discernment, and put your hand to the plow of justice as you understand it in God's law, and from the mouth of Jesus Christ.
5. Finish this statement and join the circle, prepared to offer your words within a litany prayer: I commit to work and pray in the hope that _____.

Commune and Close (5 minutes)

Gather in a circle. Invite participants to read their sentences of commitment; ask all to respond to each with the refrain (in unison), "I am the LORD your God . . . ; you shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:1–2).

Pray the closing prayer in unison.



WORDS
OF LOVE:
DON'T
FIXATE
ON WHAT
YOU DON'T
HAVE

Never Enough, Diane Savona

LESSON NINE

THE TENTH WORD

Scripture: Exodus 20:17(18–21); 1 Kings 21:1–16; and Luke 12:13–15

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor (Ex. 20:17).

Purpose

The purpose of Lesson Nine is to examine the meaning of “to covet” and to identify the ways greed and predatory desire affect our lives and communities.

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, you have given us everything—our lives, our provisions, our families, and our faith. We are grateful for every gift, and especially for the gift of time together to ponder your word. Open us to see in this Word, O God, your invitation to embrace our lives with joy and gratitude. Help us; fill us with your grace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Opening the Envelope

Today we come to the end of our journey with the Ten Words. The Ten Words have invited us into loving relationship with God and into a profound and earth-changing way of being together in community. Our love letter ends with what is, to me, the most surprising of all of the Words. The First Word declares Godself as our One and Only; circling back, the Tenth Word calls us to see ourselves and our lives differently as a result of that call. **This Word salves the wound caused by the human tendency toward greed and comparing ourselves negatively to others with a profound call to gratitude and acceptance.**

The Tenth Word

Back in the eighties, comedian George Carlin did a hilarious, if profane, skit about stuff. In this short bit, he talked about how we feel about our stuff, and how it rules our lives. He observed that our houses are the places where we keep our stuff while we go out to get more stuff. He pointed out that if there is a space to fill, we feel compelled to buy more stuff. Our houses, he said are “just a pile of stuff with a roof on it.”

The Tenth Word can be a hard one to address in modern American culture. Our economy is, in no small measure, based on the manipulating of our desires for more. Advertisements lure us to want things we do not have and often do not need. Store windows and pop-up ads call us to fill our lives with so much stuff that there is room for little else but acquiring and taking care of it. Watching our neighbors sometimes leaves us with a vague sense of restlessness and envy. I want a house like that. I want a job like that. I want clothes like that. I want an award like that. I want more. More. More. More.

What is wrong with wanting more? What is wrong with desiring? Nothing is wrong with it, in and of itself. Desire is essential to life. If we don't feel a desire to eat and act on that desire, we starve. If we don't feel a desire to love and risk loving, we die inside. If we don't feel a desire to grow in faith and pray, study, and worship, we stagnate.

Problems come when personal desire becomes the primary basis for decision-making and ethics. Problems come when desire becomes predatory. Problems come when desire overwhelms our thankfulness for God's great gifts.

The versions of the Ten Words in Exodus (20:17) and Deuteronomy (5:21) use two different Hebrew terms that we translate into English as "covet." The words are roughly synonymous, but they carry nuances of meaning that can help us understand the heartache from which God yearns to protect us with the Tenth Word.

In Exodus, the Hebrew word is *chemdah*. It refers to the desire for something that is physically lovely, close at hand, and irresistible. *Chemdah* is the desire to possess such a thing. This term is always used in the present tense and is concrete. It is a subject that always has an object; *chemdah* is oblivious to consequences. A *chemdah* kind of desire can be illustrated by the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11). David sees the beautiful, and married, Bathsheba bathing and is overwhelmed with desire for her. He acts on his desire and sets in motion murderous consequences that weave destruction into the next generation and beyond. It is an ungoverned desire for something that one feels must be acted on immediately and concretely. That is *chemdah*.

In Deuteronomy, in the later version of the Ten Words, the Hebrew word is *ta'avah*. *Ta'avah* is a more nuanced concept that gives us a window into how understanding the Tenth Word developed over time. *Ta'avah* describes a more subtle and interior experience. *Ta'avah* refers to a deep yearning, a pining for something, even if what is coveted is not physically present or outwardly beautiful. *Ta'avah* can be a yearning for something specific or, and this is important, it can simply be a yearning for something else. This is the kind of yearning that sets up in the heart and builds over time. It may or may not be rational. It may or may not be acted upon, but it slowly takes up room in the heart—room that was meant for *something else*. In extreme cases, *ta'avah* becomes the lens through which we see all of life and its value.

In other instances in which *ta'avah* is used in the Old Testament, it refers to things like cravings for rich foods (Num. 11:4), extreme thirst (2 Sam. 23:15), or beautiful women in general, even if not in the specific (Ps. 45:11). In most cases, it is linked with the Hebrew word *nephesh* (soul, spirit, inner being), indicating that *ta'avah* is something

that takes root deep inside a person and results in restlessness and dissatisfaction. It gives rise, disastrously, to scheming in order to satisfy the desire or ease the restlessness. *Ta'avah* seeks to fill holes in life with things or experiences. *Ta'avah* is wanting something, or something else, with such ferocity that one is certain she or he can never be whole or satisfied without in some way possessing the longed-for thing. When *ta'avah* or *chemdah* take root, people (or communities or nations) are willing to trade long-term happiness and stability for immediate gratification.

In Numbers 11, we see these challenges at work in the people of Israel during their time of wilderness wandering. The people grow tired of the manna that God sent them for food. Once seen as a miracle of provision, manna becomes such a source of restlessness and dissatisfaction that the people romanticize their past and long even for slavery when they had some meat to eat and maybe a pot with an onion.

Covetous restlessness can lead to rewriting our past and losing its lessons. It can even render us incapable of recognizing and appreciating the blessing of the present. We forget what is enough. Covetousness is predatory desire, and the first thing it kills is gratitude.

Pause and Reflect: Where do you think the line falls between a normal, healthy desire for things and covetousness?

Perhaps no story in the Old Testament captures the disastrous effects of covetousness better than the story of King Ahab, his no-nonsense wife Jezebel, and the faithful Israelite Naboth (1 Kings 21). Ahab, while not the worst king Israel ever endured, was not a significant moral force for the nation, either. A confessed follower of YHWH, he was married to the strong-willed Jezebel who was a follower of Baal, the chief god of the Canaanite and Phoenician religions. In the Bible, Ahab was castigated for trying to make a place for the pluralism of religious belief in the kingdom.

As it happened, the king decided that he wanted a piece of property that belonged to the faithful Naboth; he sent an offer to Naboth to purchase the land. In those days the land was considered a sacred inheritance and it would have been a great shame to Naboth to consider selling his ancestral land. He refused to sell.

The king was so distressed about not getting the parcel that he took to his bed and turned his face to the wall for three days. Jezebel, frustrated with Ahab's weakness and aware that he had a country to run, told Ahab to get up and get at it; she would take care of everything. Jezebel hatched a plot to flatter Naboth with a special role at a community celebration, hired thugs to kill him, and thereby secured the land for Ahab. This action outraged God and wound up costing Ahab everything and Jezebel her life. That is predatory desire run amok.

One of the problems with covetousness is that it often draws other sins to it. Maimonides, the great Jewish rabbi and theologian of the eleventh century, taught that desire led to covetousness, which led to robbery, which led to bloodshed. In short, desire without boundaries, when acted upon, destroys life.

❶ Is it Bad to be Rich?

Of course not. Even though wealth in the Bible is often seen as fraught with spiritual dangers, it is also understood as a gift from God for the good of the community. There are many wealthy people who do tremendous good with their wealth. The problem, from a biblical point of view, comes when wealth itself becomes an end and not a means for blessing others. When that happens, gaining and maintaining wealth can become predatory and the whole community suffers. You shall not let greed become God.

❷ Desire Run Amok.

An additional stream of thought and warning in the Hebrew scriptures is the danger of sexual desire run amok and the devastating consequences to families and to the community itself. To see examples, look at the stories of Amnon's rape of Tamar (2 Sam. 13:1–22), Shechem's rape of Dinah (Gen. 34), and David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11).

❸ Inheritance

Much attention was given in biblical times to the distribution of estates. The law provided that when a father died his estate went to his sons, with the eldest receiving a double portion. If the father had no sons, his property was divided equally among his daughters with the stipulation that they marry within the tribe so that the father's wealth would not leave the tribe.

In reality, the whole of the human predicament began with unbounded desire let loose. In the Garden of Eden, there were plenty of trees that were made available for Adam and Eve. Only one was restricted and that very restriction seemed to create the desire to possess the fruit of that tree. Yearning led to expulsion from the garden and resulted in pain and toil. When plenty is not enough, when desire is out of all proportion to need, disaster always follows.

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, covetousness is generally seen as a problem of the wealthy.❶ The poor seem to be exempt. Desire for sustainability, fair dealing, and equitable treatment is not the same thing as covetousness. Problems come when those who have enough want more and more. Disaster ensues for the community when the wealthy see the concept of enough as a moving target. There are frequent warnings and statutes that guard against the appropriation of land or property by the more powerful from the less powerful. (See for example, Ex. 34:24.) The constant and often predatory desire for more can take root in any of us and lead to problems when, as in the story of Ahab and Naboth, that desire is linked with political power.

Scripture warns against the lures of silver and gold; it recognizes the power that wealth has to ensnare a person or a community. Covetousness becomes dangerous when we see and focus on what others have and think we deserve but do not have. Thomas Mann, in his commentary on *Deuteronomy*, quotes a popular proverb, “Enough is what most of us would be glad to have if we didn't see others with more.”¹

Made explicit in Deuteronomy 7:25–26, this fixation on getting more, having more, controlling more, takes over a life or a people, and becomes not only a violation of the Tenth Word, it circles back to the First. When gaining and controlling become our priority, God can never truly be our One and Only.

Pause and Reflect: How do you think the media affects our wants today? How does the church help or hinder us in this regard?

When dissatisfaction and the restless need to acquire occupy our thoughts, gratitude and worship take second place, if they have a place in our lives at all. Worship and theology become little more than magic formulas designed to produce more of whatever it is we think we need. When we are jealous or discouraged, the grass always seems greener on the other side. The danger of failing to keep the Tenth Word is that we begin to wonder if God is really God and really on our side.❷

Jesus and the Word: Luke 12:13–15

Even though Jesus does not speak directly of coveting, the issues raised by this Word permeate his teaching, particularly when he warns against the lures of wealth. In Matthew 6:24, Jesus warns that it is not possible to serve two masters—we will inevitably love the one and hate the other. God and mammon (money and what it can buy and control) cannot be rivals for priority in the human heart. Throughout his ministry Jesus urges his followers to choose whom they will serve.

In Luke 12:13ff, a man tries to draw Jesus into settling an inheritance dispute.❸ The man is a younger son who does not believe that his older brother is giving him his fair

share of their family's inheritance. It was not uncommon for rabbis to render judgment in cases like this. Jesus perceives that greed drives the younger brother and not injustice and Jesus refuses to render a verdict. Instead, he uses this interaction to teach his followers and the man about the dangers of greed.

Jesus warns the man to be on guard against all kinds of greed. To illustrate, Jesus tells the story of the rich fool who spent his life trying to insulate himself from danger or want by gathering more and more possessions. Just when the rich fool thinks he has enough, his life is demanded of him. Jesus wants the man embroiled in the inheritance dispute to take a moment to evaluate his priorities and to ponder where his security actually lies. Our possessions can never save us, provide us with ultimate security, or protect us from harm. Both the Tenth Word and Jesus' story ask us to consider carefully what deserves our first and best energy. It also asks us to consider the role that accumulating wealth plays in our spiritual growth, insight, and progress.

Pause and Reflect: If you have been involved in a dispute over an estate, what was it like? How did you feel? What were the values that underlay the dispute?

The Word for Today

Many of us can identify with the experience of wanting something that we do not have. We may even be able to identify times when we thought that a possession or a relationship or an accomplishment might somehow fix a real problem or meet an emotional need. We don't call it "retail therapy" for nothing. Many of us may realize that what we are doing is futile, and maybe even damaging, but we still find ourselves powerless to stop the desire, and increasingly numb to the potential consequences. Some of us may know what it feels like to experience jealousy of our friends' homes, vacations, or apparent security. We may even experience *shadenfruede* (the secret inner celebration we make when another has trouble) when things go wrong. If we're familiar with these feelings, and the destructive power they can unleash, we begin to know what God is trying to protect us from with this Word.

When God ends our love letter with the call to abandon our covetous ways and tame our covetous hearts, God is, in a profound way, inviting us to embrace our lives as they are. This does not mean that if we are in want, we do not try to provide for ourselves and our families and neighbors, or that we celebrate hardship, grief, illness, or loneliness because we assume that it is our lot in life. This does mean that we are called to look at who we are and not just who we are not; to look at what we have, and not just what we do not have.

Author Joan Didion once said, "To cure jealousy is to see it for what it is, a dissatisfaction with the self, an impossible claim that one should be at once Rose Bowl princess, medieval scholar, Saint Joan, Eleanor of Aquitaine, one's sister, and a stranger in a pink hat seen once and admired on the corner of 55th and Madison—as well as oneself, mysteriously improved."² The call to reject covetousness is the call to embrace ourselves, our families, our living spaces, our spheres of influence, our accomplishments, and yes, maybe even our thighs! We are the women that the totality of our lives and choices—

and the amazing grace of God—has made us. We are enough just as we are, even while we strive to grow and mature in Christ-like-ness—beloved of the Lord, saved by grace, inheritors of eternal life.

The great eighteenth-century Rabbi Zusya was renowned for his wisdom and teaching. Yet, human as we all are, he struggled his whole life with wanting to be, and trying to be, more and better than he thought he was. The story is told that on his deathbed his disciples gathered around him and asked him for a word. He told them, “When I arrive at the heavenly tribunal, I shall not be asked why I was not Moses, why I was not Jacob, why I was not more like the fathers. When I arrive at the heavenly tribunal, I shall only be asked why I was not Zusya.”³ When love and compassion fill the heart, predatory desire has no place to root.

The Ten Words, this most powerful love letter, begins with God’s declaration of who God is and the invitation to love and embrace God in a way of life that is ruled by love of God and love of neighbor. This amazing letter ends with the call to embrace our own identity, to live our lives fully and without resentment, to bring all of who we are to God, and perhaps to love ourselves a little, too.

Pause and Reflect: What was most surprising or intriguing to you about this lesson? What is one thing you will take home from this lesson?

Summary: Love Carved in Stone

God loves us. God desires that our lives be full and joyful. In order for us to live as God designs, both as individuals and as a community, there are certain choices that we must make. There are moral responsibilities that come with being God’s people. In the Ten Words, God writes us a letter that tells us clearly what a moral life looks like and how we are to live it. The Ten Words tell us what to avoid and, in so doing, show us what to embrace. Take a moment to remember what we have learned together and be thankful.

The First Word seeks to salve the wound of loneliness in human life with the truth of God’s love for us and the calling to allow God to be our One and Only.

The Second Word seeks to salve the wound of putting other things ahead of God in our lives. It warns us against trusting things that cannot bring us lives of blessing. It asks us not to be fooled into substituting other things for God.

The Third Word seeks to salve the wound of trivializing our relationship with God. This Word summons us into deep and honest intimacy with God for who God is and not for what God can do for us.

The Fourth Word seeks to salve the wound of busyness that substitutes for holiness and achievement that substitutes for identity. It calls us, regularly and without fail, to stop and rest in the beauty and provision of God for us and for the whole human family.

The Fifth Word seeks to salve the wounds of rootlessness and unforgiveness by calling us to honor that which is honorable in our heritages and give a place of precedence to those who bring us to the fullness of life.

The Sixth Word seeks to address the wounds of selfishness, hate, and violence by calling us, as individuals and as a society, to refuse to “take life,” whether in literal or metaphorical ways.

The Seventh Word seeks to salve the wounds of superficial and exploitative relationships by calling us to worthy human connections and healthy boundaries. It reminds us that life-long commitments matter, not just to us but to the whole community.

The Eighth Word seeks to salve the wound of taking the easy way to get what we want at the expense of others. It reminds us not to take from others—not their possessions, their self-esteem, or their livelihood. This word asks us to ponder how our choices take from or lift up others.

The Ninth Word seeks to salve the wounds of breaches of personal or institutional trust. It calls us to fundamental honesty in all of our dealings and in the institutions of our society.

The Tenth Word seeks to salve the wound of greed by calling each of us to trust God’s provision and to welcome the unique lives that we live.

Praying with the Word Together and Alone

We have come to the end of our study of the Ten Words. In each Word of this amazing love letter, we have seen God’s love and desire for us shine through.

One final time, go back to the blessing circle that you created. Add to the circle the most important blessings you have received from this study. Add to the love letter you have been writing to God anything that occurs to you, knowing that you can always add more insights at any time.

Take a moment to quiet yourself. Breathe deeply of God’s loving Spirit. Remind yourself of the Ten Words. Notice that each Word calls you to a new way of life and seeks to insulate and protect you from the most grievous wounds of life. As you consider each one, pause and thank God for the love at the heart of the Word. Ask God to help you live into the powerful vision the Words articulate. If some Words are more difficult for you than others, ask for special grace to keep those Words in your life.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, your love for us is immense! We thank you for reaching out to us in the Ten Words and giving us a blueprint for living. More even than that, we thank you, that in the fullness of time you sent Jesus to us to show us what it is like to live these Words fully. Give us courage, O God, to live as your holy people, modeling our lives on Christ and transformed by your deep love. In Jesus’ holy name we pray. Amen.

WORDS OF LOVE: DON'T FIXATE ON WHAT YOU DON'T HAVE

The Tenth Word

Central Concept

Covetousness has the power to disrupt our trust in God, lead to broken relationships, and result in boundary breaking actions that cause great harm. God desires that we reject greed, claim the gifts we have been given, be generous to those with real needs, and live in gratitude.

Come Together (10 minutes)

Cut out a set of ten 8 1/2" x 11" or 9" x 12" page-sized red paper hearts. With black marker, write an abbreviated version of each commandment on a heart. These versions will work: "I am your God"; "No idols"; "No wrongful use of God's name"; "Remember the Sabbath"; "Honor your parents"; "You shall not murder"; "You shall not commit adultery"; "You shall not steal"; "You shall not lie"; "You shall not covet." Spread out on a table the hearts for Words One through Nine but hold back the heart representing the Tenth Word.

Create three title cards by writing these phrases with black marker on white paper: "Relationship with God"; "Bridge between God and Community"; and "Relationship with Our Community." Once folks have gathered, invite them to stand around the table. Remind them that throughout the study the author has referred to the Ten Commandments as God's love letter. What better way is there to represent that idea than with hearts? Invite participants, together, to sort the Ten Commandments under the three title cards. If possible, place the table under a wall or bulletin board where you can put the title cards up, and participants can tack or tape the commandments under the correct title card. They may also sort them on the table. Encourage conversation, as needed, to recall where the commandments belong. It is not important to have a correct order within the categories.

Once finished, offer the tenth heart, and invite participants to read aloud Exodus 20:17, the Tenth Word, together. It is printed on the first page of this lesson. Place the Tenth Word heart in the "Relationship with Our Community" category.

Pray the opening prayer together.

Connect (Activity One—10 minutes, Activity Two—5 minutes)

Activity One: Explain that Exodus and Deuteronomy use two different Hebrew words that are both translated as "covet." The author offers these definitions:

In Exodus the word *chemdah* captures a desire to possess something concrete, lovely, and close at hand, despite the consequences. King David's desire for Bathsheba and his taking of her, even when that required getting rid of her husband, is offered as a biblical example.

Read this definition to the group and ask them for examples of the *chemdah* definition of "covet." Only if prompting is needed, suggest that they think about ads on television, in magazines, and on Facebook that suggest that something is worth coveting and having, no matter the cost—an expensive car, an exotic vacation, a young-looking face.

In Deuteronomy the word *ta'avah* is used to convey a deep longing, a yearning, for something that may or may not be concrete but is all-consuming. The author says "... [I]t slowly takes up room in the heart—room that was meant for something else. In extreme cases, *ta'avah* becomes the lens through which we see all of life and its value" (page 102). *Ta'avah* leads to restlessness and dissatisfaction with one's life, and eventually to devious action to gain one's obsession. King Ahab's desire for a piece of

property, together with Queen Jezebel's collusion in getting it for him through the murder of the rightful owner, is offered as the biblical example.

Read the group this definition and ask for examples of the *ta'avah* definition of "covet." Suggest that they think of examples of this all-consuming yearning that they have seen in real life, in movies, or in books.

Activity Two: Note that the wound today's session addresses is "the human tendency toward greed and comparing ourselves negatively to others." Put the words "Bigger," "More," and "I wish that I was . . ." at the top of three pieces of newsprint. Give people five minutes to circulate and write on each sheet one or two things they think people want—for example, bigger houses, more money, to be prettier.

Consider and Converse (Activity One—15 minutes, Activity Two—15 minutes)

Choose Activity One or Activity Two.

Activity One: Create small groups of three or four; invite participants to choose one of the quotes below from the section "The Tenth Word" (pages 101 through 104) and explore it using the provided questions.

1. "One of the problems with covetousness is that it often draws other sins to it."
2. "Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, covetousness is generally seen as a problem of the wealthy. . . . Disaster ensues for the community when the wealthy see the concept of enough as a moving target."
3. "The constant and often predatory desire for more can take root in any of us and lead to problems when . . . that desire is linked with political power."

4. “When dissatisfaction and the restless need to acquire occupy our thoughts, gratitude and worship take second place, if they have a place in our lives at all. Worship and theology become little more than magic formulas designed to produce more of whatever it is we think we need.”

5. “An additional stream of thought and warning in the Hebrew scriptures is the danger of sexual desire run amok and the devastating consequences to families and to the community itself.”

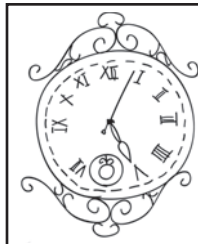
Questions to guide your discussion:

- a. What are some ways you have seen, or imagine, covetousness playing out in the quote you chose?
- b. What are some possible consequences to family, community, and self in the quote you chose?

Take a couple of minutes to hear any insights anyone might like to share with the whole group.

Activity Two: Since we are abundantly aware of the lure of covetousness, it is important to consider healthy ways to notice covetousness within ourselves and seek alternatives to letting it take hold. Ask participants to skim the section “The Word for Today” (pages 105 through 106) for any ideas they find there that might draw us back to God’s call to reject covetousness. After a couple of minutes, ask participants what they found.

If you have time, use these additional questions to enhance discovery:



Lesson Nine

Have 30 minutes or less with your group? Read aloud the “Central Concept” and the Word (commandment) for the day, then use the section “Consider and Converse,” Activity One or Activity Two, or “Care and Commit,” followed by “Commune and Close.”

- If we find it difficult to accept ourselves, how might we begin to do so?
- For what are you most grateful in your current life?
- How might focusing on gratitude help us accept ourselves?
- “When love and compassion fill the heart, predatory desire has no place to root” (page 106). What words of grace might you offer each other from today’s exploration of the Tenth Word?

Care and Commit (10 minutes)

Ask everyone to turn to the section “Summary: Love Carved in Stone” (page 106) and find the statements that review the wounds addressed by each Word, including what to avoid and what to embrace. Ask participants to sit quietly with the list, reading it and recalling the new understandings we have gained. After reviewing the list, ask participants to go back and do the following:

- a. Put an asterisk (*) beside the Word that brought you the most spiritual growth through this study.

- b. Put the numeral (1) by the Word that changed your thinking about its meaning the most.
- c. Put a question mark (?) by the Word that still puzzles you the most.
- d. Put an exclamation point (!) by the Word that took you by surprise.
- e. Put a dollar sign (\$) beside the Word that helped you notice something about yourself and start to change it.
- f. Put an arrow (→) beside the Word that calls you to do more work on it.
- g. Put a diamond (◇) beside the one that speaks to you about God’s love the most.

Commune and Close (10 minutes)

Gather in a circle. Invite each person to name one commandment—one Word—that is much more meaningful to them because of the exploration they have done in this study. If you have time, ask each person to name one thing about this group study for which they are grateful.

Pray the closing prayer in unison and use this litany as you pass the peace: “The Peace of Christ be with you.” “And also with you.”

HANDOUT FOR LESSON THREE

From Lesson Three, “The Fourth Word”:

“Sabbath is a part of the very fabric of life.”

Sabbath is “a particular consciousness, a way of being ruled by God’s love, values, and sovereign provision.”

“Sabbath is bigger and more holy than the human heart and mind can fully comprehend.”

Sabbath—“to stop, or to cease,” [Sabbath] is a part of the fabric of creation.”

“Sabbath is a radical, weekly practice of the reorganization of life and priorities toward God and in the presence of God.”

“Sabbath is a special time of connecting with the sacred as a way of being truly alive.”

“Sabbath is about celebration and not denial.”

“Sabbath practice is about orienting life away from self-sufficiency and achievement toward a quiet rest in the power and provision of God.”

“Sabbath . . . is a sanctuary or palace (castle) in time in which we keep alive the memory of creation and redemption.”

“Keeping Sabbath is also, then, about protecting that which is most sacred, and ensuring that what God intends for God’s people (and the whole created order) is not lost.”

“Sabbath in this context is a time to remember slavery in Egypt and to gather strength to fight against it happening again.”

“Keeping Sabbath . . . is a physical declaration of the radical inclusivity and equality that is at the heart of God’s will for the created order.”

“‘Sabbath-keeping’ is an act of community protest or resistance against any type of enslavement.”

“Keeping Sabbath is an act of solidarity with those who struggle most.”

“Sabbath-keeping recognizes that all are dependent on God for survival . . .”

“Sabbath-keeping is creation-keeping.”

“Sabbath is the one day every week that we, as an act of choosing, live as if all the freedom and beauty that God longs for on the earth is already present.”

“. . . Sabbath is an example of the world to come. . . . Because in it, all are focused on God, rest is woven into the fabric, and all are equal before God.”

“Sabbath is that one day each week when we stop long enough for beauty to break through, for our sublime dependence upon God to enter our busyness and remind us to whom we truly belong.”

“[Sabbath] is a day for special foods, for special prayers, for family and friends.”

“[Sabbath] is a day for welcoming our vulnerability and letting go of the illusion that it is by our work that the planets stay in their courses.”

“[Sabbath] is a day for recognizing how the sacred surrounds us and how God makes something holy of us together.”

From “Jesus and the Word”:

“Sabbath is to be a gift and not a burden. It is to bring life and not to take it.”

“Sabbath is for joy and wholeness.”

“On Sabbath the hungry are fed. On Sabbath the wounded are made whole. On Sabbath everything is oriented around the values of God.”

Directions for Discussion

Skim the statements individually and choose one that seems to “weave our relationship with God into our life in community.” Read your chosen statement aloud and explain how you see your choice making that connection.

Go back to the statements and choose one that introduces you to a new idea about Sabbath that you would like to think more about. When ready share your choice and why it is intriguing to you.

Choose one statement that gives you hope for Sabbath as a window into God’s future for humanity. Read it and name the hope you take from the statement. Be prepared to read your choice aloud in the whole group.

HANDOUT FOR LESSON SIX

From Lesson Six, "The Word for Today":

1. Examine your marriage to be sure the boundaries are clear and sacred.
2. Consider the many ways you have adulterated important relationships in your life, through dishonesty, abuse, or disinterest.
3. Remember times you have cheapened your relationships with impatience, short-cuts, and meanness.
4. Recall times that you, a child of God, got pleasure at the expense of others.
5. Consider whether your hobbies, jobs, or worries get more of your time and attention than your marriage, your family, and your closest friends.

6. Explore a time you cheapened a relationship with manipulation, abuse of power, and hurtful words.

7. Recall a time you privatized morality by choosing to think that something that is generally not right is still right for you.

Sit with the list in silence. Choose one of the situations that in the past or now convicts you and invites your regret and confession. Offer your confession to God in your own words, or use this expression as a starting point: "Grace-filled, grace-giving God, I confess that I _____. In your Word, 'You shall not commit adultery,' you call me to greater faithfulness both as your child and as a follower of

your Son, Jesus Christ, in your beloved community. Forgive me, and free me to know and do your will. Amen."

HANDOUT FOR LESSON SEVEN

Narrator: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand,

King: 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

Narrator: Then the righteous will answer him,

Righteous: 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

Narrator: And the king will answer them,

King: 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Narrator: Then he will say to those at his left hand,

King: 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger

and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

Narrator: Then they also will answer,

Accursed: 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'

Narrator: Then he will answer them,

King: 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

Narrator: And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

HANDOUT FOR LESSON EIGHT

For use with **Connect**, activity one.

What do you learn about truth from each statement or story?

You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another (Lev. 19:11).

Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment (Prov. 12:19).

Malicious witnesses rise up; they ask me about things I do not know (Ps. 35:11).

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives . . . (Ex. 1:15–20a).

Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, "Go, view the land, especially Jericho." So they went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there. The king of Jericho was told, "Some Israelites have come here tonight to search out the land." Then the king of Jericho sent orders to Rahab, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come only to search out the whole land." But the woman took the two men and hid them. Then she said, "True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they came from. And when it was time to close the gate at dark, the men went out. Where the men went I do not know. Pursue them quickly, for you can

overtake them." She had, however, brought them up to the roof and hidden them with the stalks of flax that she had laid out on the roof (Josh. 2:1–6).

So [Jacob] went in to his father, and said, "My father"; and he said, "Here I am; who are you, my son?" Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, so that you may bless me." But Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?" He answered, "Because the LORD your God granted me success." Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not." So Jacob went up to his father Isaac, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him. He said, "Are you really my son Esau?" He answered, "I am" (Gen. 27:18–27).

But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. "Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. . . . After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price." And she said, "Yes, that was the price." Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will

carry you out." Immediately she fell down at his feet and died (Acts 5:1–5, 7–10).

They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire. Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands'" But even on this point their testimony did not agree" (Mk. 14:53–65).

Jesus said to [Thomas], "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn. 14:6).

The gifts [Christ] gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love (Eph. 4:11–16).

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (Jn. 8:31–32).

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2. Chittister, 49f.
3. *Ibid.*, 49.
4. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.35.
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Lesson Six

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3. John 7:53–8:11 was relatively late finding its way into the New Testament canon and does not appear in some early manuscripts. For that reason, some translations put it in a footnote.

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5. For a fascinating article, see www.openculture.com/2017/01/hannah-arendt-explains-how-propaganda-uses-lies-to-erode-all-truth-morality.html.
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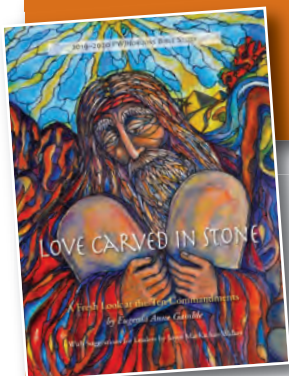
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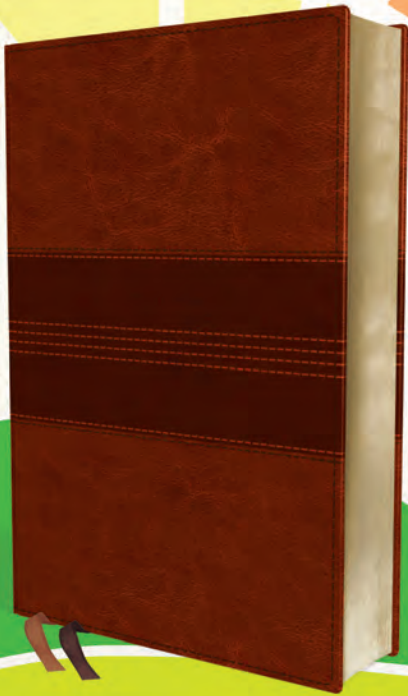
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