

SERMON TITLE: "Ten Commandments 3 & 4: Practice Holy Living"

SERMON TEXT: Exodus 20:1-11

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: January 14, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

On Thursday, I went to the Centenary United Methodist Church in Salt Lake City for a United Methodist clergy meeting. Since it was our first meeting in this new year, we read and prayed our way through the liturgy of the Wesleyan Covenant Renewal Service. That service, found in our United Methodist *Book of Worship*, has been in use by Methodist people for more than 200 years. The Tongan pastors who were at the clergy meeting told us they use the Wesleyan Covenant Renewal Service every year on New Year's Eve, at a worship service that has an even bigger attendance than Christmas Eve.

What makes the Wesleyan Covenant Renewal Service so important? It's a call, at the beginning of a new time, to repent of sin, and to turn our lives over to God. The covenant renewal calls us to "consider the laws of Christ, how holy, strict, and spiritual they are, and whether [we], after having carefully considered them, are willing to choose them all." It's a call to dedicate ourselves afresh to the practice of holy living.

That sounds a lot like where we are in our sermon series on the Ten Commandments. After the free-for-all of the holiday season, our bodies, minds, and spirits crave some structure and clarity, some law and order. So, last Sunday, we began the New Year with commandments one and two and heard that we must worship God first and only. Today, as we move on to commandments three and four, I invite you to carefully consider these laws with me to see how we might practice holy living.

1—DON'T MAKE WRONGFUL USE OF THE NAME OF THE LORD YOUR GOD

We begin with commandment three, which is found in Exodus 20:7. There we read, "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God." I still remember a 7th grade Sunday School lesson on this commandment. We were instructed that any swearing was bad, but the worst was the

kind that used the name of God or Jesus Christ in a derogatory way. I remember the lesson even included other versions of those names like “gosh darn,” “gee whiz,” and “jeepers.” For us 12 and 13-year olds, the focus of the lesson was on the literal words that should not pass our lips.

Even as adults, there are still words that shouldn’t pass our lips. We certainly should respect God’s name and Jesus Christ our Lord. It doesn’t serve God or us well to throw the divine names around loosely or to use them to express anger. It certainly isn’t our place to use God’s name to curse other people.

In the past, at least, and maybe even in the present, some Jewish people have taken this commandment so seriously that they’ve been reluctant to pronounce or write out all the letters of God’s name for fear of using God’s name in vain and defiling it. They think that we humans are so inferior to God, that we may not be able to use God’s name carefully enough. Christians, generally, haven’t worried about that. But maybe we fall down in other ways. Maybe sometimes it isn’t the literal speaking of God’s name that we should be worrying about as much as how our behavior reflects on God’s name.

In my devotional time, I’ve recently been reading through the book of Ezekiel. God’s message there is that the Israelites had degraded God’s holy name by polluting the land with their idol worship and misdeeds. When their punishment forced them into exile in Babylon, the surrounding nations saw God’s so-called “chosen people” for what they were--a bad representation of who God was. They gave a dishonorable picture of God to the people of the other nations. According to the Prophet Ezekiel, God then had to work very hard to clean up the mess and restore God’s good and holy name (36:16-23).

Maybe we need to ask ourselves today, what picture of God do we present to our neighbors, co-workers, family members, and friends? When we’re driving in our cars, shopping in a store, playing a round of golf, or making a business deal, do we defile God’s name by the way we behave? By our habits, values, and manner of speaking, do we uplift God’s holy name, or abuse it?

If we claim to be Christians, then we need to uphold the name of Christ not just by carefully speaking Christ's name but also by practicing the holy life that Christ lived. In his Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (7:21). In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:35).

The celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day tomorrow reminds us that this Christian call to love one another extends beyond our families, friends, and ancestry groups to those who are of different cultures and colors. A lot of excuses get made for racism in our country, but as your spiritual leader I am obligated to say that, when we call ourselves Christian and expect the affirmation and support of other Christian people, it behooves us to consider carefully our call to Christian life as found in our baptismal vows. Do you remember those questions? "Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin? Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves? Do you promise to serve [Christ] as your Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?"

So, at the beginning of this new year, I ask you: Do you choose again to accept the rule of Christ in your heart? As you go about your daily life in the world—at school, at work, at home, and in the community—will you practice holy living? With your words and your actions, do you promise to respect, honor, and uplift God's holy name?

2—REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY

Of course, the day-to-day practice of holy living is made easier if we take time each week to remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. That's the fourth commandment, which is found in Exodus 20:8. If we have any doubt about what that means, we can read the following verses. The sabbath is a

day in which we are not supposed to work--and not only us, but also our children, servants, migrants, and livestock. God did all his work in six days, and so should we. The seventh day is a day for rest. It's a blessed and consecrated time. It's a time to recognize that no matter how hard we work, no matter how productive and important we are, eventually, there's more to life than what we do. Or, conversely, if we're worried that we're not getting enough done, or that our work isn't measuring up, the sabbath is a time to let go of those troubles and lay aside our cares. Our observance of the sabbath is our acknowledgement that we rely not on our own selves, but ultimately on God. Whatever normally fills up our days, the sabbath is a time to "give it a rest." The sabbath is our time to let go, and let God. It's a weekly time to celebrate that, somehow, in God's good plan, all will be well.

This weekly spiritual re-set is vital to our practice of holy living. We, no less than God (!), need this sacred time. Fortunately, this fourth commandment has shaped our culture to the extent that most of us don't have to fight for days off from work. Because most people have Sundays off, we're able to gather a crowd at church on a Sunday morning. Unfortunately, though, persons whose days off are on Tuesdays or Thursdays don't usually find a worship service to attend. Very few congregations of any kind offer viable weekday ministries like that. Hopefully, Sunday workers can at least find a Bible study or some other kind of Christian fellowship and nurture. But, I'm also sadly aware that many, many workers in our service-based economy have schedule variability and irregularity that doesn't lend itself to consistent participation in any spiritual community.

For a Sunday worker to hold onto Christian faith, they have to be quite diligent in personal spiritual disciplines of Bible reading, prayer, and acts of Christian service. Because that requires a lot of self-motivation, it's a heavier spiritual burden than we Sunday worshipers have to carry. If you have someone like that in your life, I hope you will do your best to encourage them in faith and help connect them to church ministries and events that are available on their days off. When you are aware of

someone who would really like to be here on Sundays with us, but has to work, reach out to that person and help them to stay connected to our congregation.

Then, of course, there's still us who do have Sundays off from work. How are we doing with keeping the sabbath day holy? Are we consecrating time with God, or are we using up our free time in less spiritual ways? Is our "time of rest" so filled with activities that we're worn out rather than spiritually rejuvenated? Is our worship attendance as faithful as it could be? Are we minimalists, giving God some time, but as little as possible? Or do we make the most of our Sabbath opportunity by adding Sunday school and Christian fellowship to our worship time? Are we devoting a significant portion of the Sabbath day to reading scripture, praying, worshiping, and growing in Christian faith?

Yes, I know. Spiritual disciplines aren't just for Sundays. Hopefully the commandment to remember the Sabbath day will be a positive influence on all our days, as we practice holy living.

CONCLUSION

Earlier in the service we sang the song "Sanctuary." I chose that chorus because it fits so well with today's theme. "Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true./ With thanksgiving, I'll be a living sanctuary for you."* When we enter into God's sacred space on the sabbath, we're a lot more likely to be a holy sanctuary throughout the week. Let's faithfully give God this opportunity to prepare us to be a positive witness to God's name in all that we say and do. On Sundays and every day, let's practice holy living.

*John Thompson and Randy Scruggs, Whole Armor/Full Armor Music, 1982.