

OPENING HYMN

“Change My Heart, O God”
(ELW 801)

OPENING PRAYER

Almighty, all-knowing, all-compassionate God, you know us through and through. From our head to our toes, from our unspoken thoughts to our hidden actions, you know us completely. We thank you for giving us your words of life as a good path for our lives. When we go astray, please pick us up again, redirect us and give us a fresh start, that we might be a blessing in our homes, community, workplace and church. In Jesus Christ our Savior’s name we trust and pray. Amen.

FOCUS VERSE

“You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet...” (Exodus 20:15)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*
- Paper and pencils, or whiteboard
- (Optional) *The Large Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther 1529: The Annotated Luther Study Edition*, ed. Kirsi I. Stjerna (Fortress Press, 2016); *Luther’s Small Catechism with African Descent Reflections*, ed. Joseph Bocko (Augsburg Fortress, 2019); and *Luther’s Small Catechism: An Exposition of the Christian Faith in Asian Contexts and Cultures*, ed. J. Paul Rajashekar (The Association of Asians and Pacific Islanders–ELCA, 2019).

The Ten Commandments: Reviving the soul

Session four

Trail markers for love of God and neighbor
(Commandments 7–10)

BY CHRISTA VON ZYCHLIN

INTRODUCTION

In our *Godly Play* (<https://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/>) Sunday school program, we don’t call them the Ten Commandments; we call them the Ten Best Ways. We remember how the Israelites wandered in the desert. We contemplate how the desert can be a dangerous place, with its blazing sun and lack of shade, and the shifting sands which make it easy to get lost. Lack of food and water causes grumbling and suspicion among the Israelite people. They ask if their leaders (and God!) brought them out into the wilderness for nothing. In the *Godly Play* interpretation, the commandments become stone markers, to show the God-given, best path through the wonderful, but challenging and ever-changing, landscape of life.

One of my family’s amazing discoveries since moving to New Mexico is White Sands National Park, with sparkling white sand dunes as far as the eye can see. While there are easier paths, our favorite is the five-mile Alkali Flat Trail, where a warning sign greets us: “Bring at least two liters of water! Follow the markers! Don’t go off trail! People have died out here!”

The views are spectacular. We plow through sand, slide down dunes, marvel at purple mountains in the distance. Since the sands are always

shifting, there is no one right trail. It's essential to always, always keep the markers in sight if we want to find our way home.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Tell about a time while hiking or traveling when you found your way only with the help of clear markers?
2. Is thinking of the Ten Commandments as general markers, rather than a paved path, a helpful analogy?

OFF THE PATH, OUT OF THE GARDEN

📖 **Read:** Genesis 2:16–17; 3:1–6, Exodus 20:15–17a

Was the first sin simply a *theft*? Adam and Eve took fruit from the single tree (out of many in the garden) that God had specifically told them was not for them. Or was the first sin a matter of the crafty serpent *bearing false witness*, making innuendos where God had made a clear statement? Or could the first sin have been a matter of *coveting*, an unholy desire for what belonged to God alone?

Plainly it was a sin against the first commandment — our first parents trusted the serpent more than they trusted God. The serpent also breaks the second commandment, *misusing God's name* by insinuating (a word that comes from the same root as “to slide and curve like a snake”) that God is not looking out for the best interests of human beings. The first sin was a kind of *adultery*, not in the sexual sense (we always remember that sex in a committed relationship between two people is created “very good” in Genesis), but an adultery in the sense of betraying their intimate relationship with God.

Theft, murder, lies and all the rest of humanity's sins began taking place well before the Ten

Commandments were written in stone and given to Moses to carry down the mountain. Isn't that the usual way, that often it's only after people get lost or are hurt along a trail that fences are built and warning signs are posted?

In this first sin story of the Bible, we can also see how individual sins relate to each other to cause an overall brokenness. As the New Testament book of James would state it many years later, “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (James 2:10). The commandments are linked like a chain, or like a gorgeous piece of knitting. To break one strand is to ruin or begin unraveling the entire thing, keeping it from protecting what it's meant to protect.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. Reflect on a current news story, TV show or film where one moral failing led to another.
4. If you have time, consider how many of the Ten Commandments were broken in the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11).

DON'T STEAL OR SKIMP

📖 **Read:** Exodus 20:15, Leviticus 19:13, Proverbs 20:10, 23, Amos 8:1–2, 4–8

I'll never forget the sweet crunch of the apple which the older man, fatherly and gray, handed me out of the back of the pickup.

I was newly pregnant at the time and everything I put in my mouth mattered. I wanted nothing tainted with insecticides, nothing artificial. I couldn't stand meat; the smell of cooking made me sick. But there in the middle of a hot summer afternoon — a miracle: two men in a truck loaded with

bushel baskets of apples, driving down Highway 39, which ran by our little parsonage in Ohio.

“Just drove ’em down from Michigan this morning,” said the old man as he cut the apple in half and handed me a sample. “But we only sell ’em by the bushel, so if you think you could use that much...”

Absolutely I could! I was going to eat apples every day of my pregnancy! I happily handed over \$15, a lot of money for us back then, but I considered it an investment in my child’s future. When my husband came home, he tasted the other half of my apple. “These are great!” he said, reaching into the basket for a second one. Then, “Wait a minute, this one’s mushy.”

Digging through the basket, we saw that we had just purchased a pricey bushel of mealy, maggot-ridden fruit. We dashed out the front door just in time to see that shiny blue truck speed down the road.

“You shall not steal,” thunders the Lord God in the eighth of the Ten Commandments. Since the earliest times, God’s people have understood this to be about much more than just grabbing something that belongs to someone else. Stealing is also making late payments of wages (Leviticus 19:13) and false weights, which are “an abomination” (Proverbs 20:10, 23). In Amos 8 we get the image and word-play of a basket of ripe fruit which is compared to the wealthy, cheating businessfolk who enslave the poor with low wages and sell garbage as if it’s nutritious grain. They are so ripe for judgment that the very earth will tremble on account of it.

I think about these Bible passages when I consider contemporary practices that especially affect those of lower income: *shrinkflation* (the 16-ounce box of cereal that suddenly weighs only 15 ounces, but comes in a box the same size). Or the inexpensive new shirt, often made in another country by poor people working long hours in dangerous conditions, perhaps literally “for a pair of sandals” (Amos 8:6) — after three washings, the shirt is worthless and is contributed to a landfill. Or

employers who pay people in cash or contract workers so as to avoid employment taxes and sick-leave requirements (churches and other nonprofits are not innocent of this practice). Or an elderly widower who is talked into buying an expensive insurance policy he doesn’t need and didn’t really want. Are any of these examples of stealing?

According to the Bible, yes! Keeping God’s commandments is never simply a matter of narrow legal definitions. In all our dealings, we keep this marker in full view so that we don’t (as Luther states in the Small Catechism) engage in “shoddy merchandise or crooked deals, but instead help [our neighbor] to improve and protect their property and income” (*ELW*, p. 1161).

Share aloud or reflect:

5. Think of a time when something was stolen from you. How did you feel?
6. How does your daily work help to “improve and protect [others’] property and income”?

THE OPPOSITE OF THEFT

📖 **Read:** Exodus 22:7, Luke 19:1–10, Luke 21:1–4

Zacchaeus is a thief of the governmental variety. He’s not just a tax-collecting bean counter; he’s a *chief* tax-collecting bean counter, in the wealthy city of Jericho. Jericho, also known as the City of Palms, is an oasis, sourced by numerous natural springs. Because of its location and climate, it is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Taxes were high in this popular city. Whether the Roman occupiers increased taxes or not, Zacchaeus made sure his cut went up and up, so that by the time we meet him, he “was rich” (Luke 19:2).

Zacchaeus hears that the new, upstart rabbi, Jesus, is coming by. Famously, he climbs a sycamore tree to get a better look. It seems Zacchaeus expects to be a spectator only, but Jesus surprises everyone by speaking as if he and the tax collector are old friends. “Zacchaeus, I’m coming to your house today!” he says in front of all those people who hate Zacchaeus, the conniving taxman.

This unlikely exchange turns the man who felt he had a license to steal into a man with a heart and desire to give. Zacchaeus promises restitution four times over to anyone whom he has cheated. Four times is twice what is required by the law of Exodus 22. He goes even further by vowing to give half of his possessions to the poor. An extravagant gesture, this puts Zacchaeus in the same league as the poor widow of Luke 21, who gave everything she had. Zacchaeus is summoned to generosity; he has become a citizen of the House of Salvation (Luke 19:9).

Share aloud or reflect:

7. How do you think those who were cheated would have responded to Zacchaeus’ act of restitution? Do you know of any contemporary acts of restitution? What was the response?
8. Have you known someone who has had a radical turnaround from selfishness to generosity? What may have prompted the change?

SPEAKING THE TRUTH

📖 **Read:** Exodus 20:16, Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7b, Proverbs 12:22–23, Genesis 20:1–13

The eighth commandment not only commands us not to bear false witness, but adds the words “against your neighbor.” To honor this

commandment well, there will be, as Ecclesiastes 3:7 puts it, “a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.” The book of Proverbs has a dozen or more verses pertaining to lying (God is definitely against it!), yet Proverbs 12:22–23 might seem contradictory. “Lying lips are an abomination” in verse 22, but in verse 23, concealing knowledge is considered clever? Isn’t concealment of knowledge a kind of lying? The path of wisdom lies with asking ourselves: *What effect can we reasonably expect our words to have on our neighbor?*

The midwives Shiphrah and Puah in Egypt certainly weren’t fully truthful when they told the king of Egypt that the reason they let the Hebrew baby boys live, was unlike Egyptians, Hebrew women “give birth before the midwife comes to them” (Exodus 1:17–19). Yet for the sake of saving the lives of their infant “neighbors,” God commends their prevarications!

The story of Abraham passing off his wife as his sister is a more convoluted example of using words to mislead. It is the second time Abraham has asked his wife to shade the truth, in order to protect his own life (the first time was in Genesis 12:10–20). Or are they just using their wits, believing there was “no fear of God at all in this place” (Genesis 20:11)? Yet God speaks to Abimelech and commends him for his integrity (v. 6), implying that Abimelech did in fact fear God. So, were Abraham and Sarah making prejudgments against the religion and morality of King Abimelech and his people?

In *Luther’s Small Catechism: An Exposition of the Christian Faith in Asian Contexts and Cultures*, the writers caution us:

Christians are prone to vilify or denigrate the religious claims of others... this commandment invites us to be mindful of how we preach the Gospel without bearing false witness or mischaracterizing the beliefs of our neighbors. (pp. 36–37)

Our words can be life-giving, or they can be poisonous. Our African Descent siblings confront

us with further interpretations of the eighth commandment:

Besides straight-up, outright lying, there are some ways in which we lie and bear false witness today: using white lies to “protect” someone... telling people what they want to hear instead of what they need to hear... failing to tell them something that ought to be told for the common good. (p. 27)

The same section of *Luther’s Small Catechism with African Descent Reflections* goes on to remind us of 14-year-old Emmett Till, who was murdered in Mississippi in 1955. Testimony against this teenage Black neighbor, accusing him of flirting with a young white woman, resulted in his brutal death by lynching. Failure to remember his death is false witness through silence.

Share aloud or reflect:

9. Can you think of other times when someone told a half-truth or an outright lie in order to protect a life?
10. Do you agree that silence can be a kind of “false witness”? How have you or your church taken steps to address that?

COVET NOT—GUARD YOUR HEART

📖 **Read:** Exodus 20:17, Luke 12:13–21, Philippians 4:10–14

I can’t remember hearing the word “covet” ever used in daily conversation. Various versions of the Bible may help us to zero in on its meaning. These include:

- *Do not desire to possess anything that belongs to another person...* (Contemporary English Version)
- *You must not be envious...* (Today’s Living Bible)
- *You must not want to take your neighbor’s [things]...* (Easy to Read Version)

- *Do not desire and try to take your neighbor’s [things].* (Contemporary English Bible)
- *No lusting after your neighbor’s [things]... Don’t set your heart on anything that is your neighbor’s.* (The Message)

Whereas the preceding commandments deal largely with outward behaviors — murder, sexual relations, stealing and lying — the word “covet” deals with sins of the heart: egoism, lust, jealousy, and all the misplaced desires that tempt us to harmful action against our neighbor. Often the weight of all those desires leads to self-hate as well.

Jesus tells an all-too-familiar story of two siblings having one of those ugly arguments over who gets what in an inheritance. One brother — the religious one, no doubt — goes to Jesus and says what whining children all over the world say to teachers and parents: “Make him share with me.”

But Jesus won’t play the divine referee. Jesus basically says, “If this is your overarching concern in life, you’ve got bigger problems than an exact accounting of the inheritance. Watch out for this coveting business. It will eat your life away. You’ll be like the guy who builds bigger and better homes, businesses and even empires. Fool, you don’t get an extra minute of life that way.”

St. Augustine and, later Luther, referred to much of human sin with the Latin phrase *Incurvatus in se*, meaning “curved inward on oneself.” Coveting is like a gravitational pull of self, which looks to our neighbors only to compare ourselves and our things with them. It is an old-fashioned concept with a surprisingly modern application. In a recent blog post titled “Social Media Is a Neighborhood Built on Coveting,” the author writes: “When it comes to social media... the cry rings out from every side: ‘Come here to covet, and to be coveted! Get the latest, get the greatest! Or be the greatest and the latest!’” He then goes on to challenge the reader, “How often do you come up for air out of social media, and feel more satisfied about

life, more content with yourself? How often do you feel that you've touched, or been reminded of more of, the good that's in God's world?" (<https://tinyurl.com/ynfp8s9v>).

In contrast, Paul's words in Philippians 4 express the opposite of coveting: compassion, contentment and gratitude. Paul is delighted that the Philippians are showing concern for him. He rejoices not so much for his own sake as for theirs. He knows that compassion and concern will help keep the church safe from the degrading effects of *incurvatus in se*. Coveting narrows our thinking and asks, *What do I want?* Compassion teaches us to look outward to what is good for others. And then Paul writes the classical words of Christian confidence:

For I have learned to be content with whatever I have.... In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11b-13)

Share aloud or reflect:

11. Do you agree that "social media is a neighborhood built on coveting"? Why or why not? Is it possible to harness social media for contentment, compassion and gratitude? If so, how?
12. Describe a time in your life when you've been utterly content.

CONCLUSION: JESUS AND DESIRES OF THE HEART

📖 **Read:** Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:34–40, Romans 13:8–10, John 15:12–14

Many Christians make the mistake of thinking that

the Old Testament is all about law and the New Testament is about love. This is actually a form of bearing false witness about the Hebrew Scriptures! As we have studied the Ten Commandments together, we have seen how Old Testament "laws" are better called "teachings." They are a gift from God to the ancient, wandering Israelites, and continue to reflect God's love for God's people today, serving as path markers for lives of goodness.

Jesus would have learned this positive understanding of the commandments from Mary and Joseph, growing up and nurtured in an observant Jewish household and surrounded by a Jewish community. What Jesus alone did, of course, was to perfectly fulfill those commandments, guided by the overarching love of his Father. This perfect fulfillment of the commandments culminated in the gift of his very life for us, his friends.

As we wonder about the meaning of the commandments for today, perhaps we are humbled to discover how far they reach, how easily they are ignored, how loveless toward God and neighbor we so often are. It's then that we become better aware that the commandments also point us not just to the next rock or marker, but to the One whose love is perfect, eternal and true.

CLOSING HYMN

"How Firm a Foundation" (*ELW* 796)

CLOSING PRAYER

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, but always to your glory and the welfare of your people, through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. (*ELW*, p. 86) 🌿

The Ten Commandments: Reviving the soul

Session four

Trail markers for love of God and neighbor

BY CHRISTA VON ZYCHLIN

OVERVIEW

We have come to the final session of our study of the Ten Commandments. Hopefully, you are finding it as worthwhile as Martin Luther found it. Luther included the commandments in the catechisms he wrote as a kind of “Christianity 101” for the people of Germany in the 16th century.

Many Christian churches still teach the Ten Commandments in Sunday school, confirmation and new-member classes. Does your congregation still teach the Ten Commandments on a regular basis? Why or why not? Do the Ten Commandments have meaning for modern people in a multiethnic, multireligious society? Would you agree with the Godly Play interpretation, that the Ten Commandments offer people wisdom on the Ten Best Ways to live? Does it help to reframe the Ten Commandments as ten ways to follow Jesus’ teaching on “the greatest commandment”: to love God and love neighbor?

In this Gather Bible study, we’ve been using one of the simplest methods of biblical interpretation: allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. As we’ve placed various texts of the Bible side by side, we’ve seen that Scripture itself teaches us humility. There is no single correct way and, other than Jesus, no single perfect keeper of the commandments. In this

life, each of us has, at best, partial knowledge (see 1 Corinthians 13:12, in Paul’s famous chapter on love). As we look at the commandments—how they are written; how they are kept, skirted or completely broken in the biblical stories; how in the Gospels, Jesus gives us a way of living out the commandments—we can strive to honestly share the understandings and experiences written upon our individual hearts, while we pray for the Holy Spirit to build our Christian community and lead us into a deeper love of the one God and all our neighbors.

TIPS FOR LEADERS

1. Don’t get confused by the final two commandments being considered together in this study. As we noted in the first session, different groups number the commandments differently (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ten_Commandments).
2. In most Protestant and Jewish traditions, the two final “covet” categories are combined as the 10th commandment. Only Catholics and Lutherans split them into two commandments: the 9th commandment, which reads, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house” and the 10th commandment, which reads, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” In either case, this is a sore point for feminist theologians (lumping wives in with oxen and donkeys) and for everyone insulted by the notion of anyone enslaving another person, but the wording reflects the ethos of that time.
3. The commandment against coveting someone else’s spouse can also make the not-so-subtle point that coveting a person means objectifying that person—as if they were merely a possession alongside other possessions. The commandment forbids this too.

4. If you have less than two hours allotted, I would encourage you to assign the Bible readings ahead of time or print out copies of the passages, to save time looking them up.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. If time allows (or as an icebreaker before the session begins), consider asking in advance for participants to bring a lighthearted “show & tell” object or photo that represents:
 - a way in which you, your church or your community are helping others “improve and protect their property and income” (as a positive way of keeping the 7th commandment).
 - an advertisement or picture of something (hopefully not someone) you covet— or are trying hard not to covet.
2. If you are doing a longer session or using this study as part of a retreat or follow-up event, you might invite a guest who can speak to positive ways of keeping the last several commandments:
 - 7th commandment (don’t steal) — someone who works in construction and/or can give a few pointers on shoddy vs. solid home-improvement work and what to look for in a contractor.
 - 8th commandment (false witness) — someone who has been a witness for a legal proceeding, or someone who has been a “whistleblower” at work.
 - 9th and 10th commandments (covet) — someone who deliberately lives below their means or someone who does nonprofit work with community members to, as Luther states in the Small Catechism, “be of help and service to them in keeping what is theirs” (ELW, p. 1161).

SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

Keep all discussion short, allowing for only one or two responses for each question. You might also consider asking participants to reflect on the questions at home and create a private Facebook page

(or the equivalent) for them to share short written reflections at a later time.

1. **Introduction** – Read this section. Do Q1. (Skip Q2, Off the Path and Out of the Garden, and Qs 3 & 4.)
2. **The 7th Commandment** – Read the Bible readings (but skip the rest of the section.) Briefly ask participants to consider Q5. (Skip Q6.)
3. **The Opposite of Theft** – Do the whole section. (Skip Q7.) Do Q8.
4. **The 8th Commandment** – Read the short Bible readings. (Skip reading Genesis 20:1-13.) Read the study section. (Skip Q9.) Do Q10.
5. **The 9th and 10th Commandments** – Read the whole section. (Skip Q11.) Do Q12.
6. **Conclusion** – Read this section.

A LITTLE LONGER (45–60 minutes)

As above, but allow more time for the short discussions, especially the final one where you brainstorm ways to enhance or highlight practical ministries of your congregation, in light of all ten commandments.

CLOSING

Take a moment at the end of the session to thank participants for making time to be together to study the Word of God and become a stronger fellowship of faith. Thank those who brought food, and perhaps mention any insights you’ve personally gained from others during this study. If you have time to sing “How Firm a Foundation” (ELW 796), it beautifully summarizes our Christian foundation on Christ, the Word, who accompanies us on this pathway of life, even when commandments are broken or the way is hard. 🌿