“Commands With Promise”

“You Shall Not Steal”

“You Shall not Bear False Witness”

Today we will look at the 8th and 9th commandments. The eighth of the Ten Commandments says this: “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15). This command, when first given to Israel, was meant to protect one’s belongings and property. Today, about 3500 years later, it's still part of the ground rules for a civil society: don’t take what belongs to someone else!

In the time of the Old Testament, methods of stealing were pretty obvious: physically taking someone’s sheep or goats, or breaking into their tent and hauling off with their belongings.

There are still robberies today: someone breaks into your home, or someone holds up a mini-market or a bank. Some crooks still steal the “old-fashioned way”!

Then too, people take things from their workplace. I was talking once to man who worked for a construction company, and he told me how workers take expensive equipment and keep it as if they had a right to it. Theft can happen in schools:kids take something from another student's desk or locker. Then there are the “souvenirs” we gather – something to remember our vacation by! A lady came running to her husband, “That new cleaning lady we hired stole two of our towels this morning!” “Which towels?” the husband asked. “You know, the ones we brought home last winter from the motel in Orlando!”

What about lost and found items? I heard a news story about an armored truck that overturned on a highway in Florida, spilling money all over the road. Many people stopped, and grabbed what they could for themselves. Only a few returned what they found.

There are other ways we can steal, where we may not *physically* take something, but we are still stealing. *Employees can steal from their employers by not putting in an honest day’s work.* I worked one summer in a large factory. It was common for some the workers to sleep part of the night on the 11 to 7 shift. I once went into a large room on the top floor of one of the buildings (one of the few places that had air conditioning). It was a steamy, hot summer night. The room was dark, and when I turned on the light, a guy crawled out from under a table. Another man was lying on a big shelf and poked up his head to see who I was, and yet another man appeared from somewhere else. It kind of reminded me of walking into a dark room, turning on the light, and seeing a bunch of cockroaches scurrying for cover!

Employers can steal from employees by not giving decent and adequate wages.The Book of James says, “Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty”

(James 5:4).

We can steal another person’s innocence*.* How many children have been robbed of their innocence by being sexually abused.How many children have had their childhood stolen because dysfunctional or inadequate parents forced these kids to assume adult responsibilities way too soon.

We can steal another person’s faith. I read that when Mark Twain married Olivia Langdon she was a very devout Christian. He was so unsympathetic with her faith that gradually she gave up her religious practices. Later a deep sorrow came into her life. Mark urged her, “Livy, lean on your faith.” Sadly she said to him, “I can’t. I haven’t any left.” To his dying day he was haunted by the fact that he had taken from her that which had meant so much.

Sometimes we steal, not by taking, but by withholding things from people.This command against stealing *does* preserve our right to *earn and keep private property*, but it was never meant to justify *selfishness - keeping it all for ourselves!* The Bible says that ultimately all we have belongs to God, and we have an obligation to share God’s good gifts with others in need.

Ephesians 4:28 emphasizes this directive, “Those who have been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, *that they may have something to share with those in need.”*

Our complex, hi-tech society opens up new ways to steal not thought of in the Bible! Copyrightlaws, for example. Identity theft.Someone hacks our Facebook account, or steals our credit card information. Maybe you've had this happen to you, and you know what a mess it is to get this straightened out.

“You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15). Imagine what it would be like to live in a society where there are no laws against stealing! If my lawn mower dies, I’ll just come to your house and swipe yours. Or if I'm a little short of money, I'll just grab your wallet or pocketbook and take your money. God has given us this commandment to prevent life and society from becoming chaotic!

I'll close out my words regarding this commandment with a refreshing story. A Manheim Township woman named Teresa Roda one day chased down $2510 blowing all over College Avenue in Lancaster. She returned the money, and a wallet, to the police, whereupon they found the owner. Well, the national news media picked up the story. She appeared on a broadcast of MSNBC. She was featured on National Public Radio and in *USA Today.* Her response, “I’m shocked. I just didn’t think it was that big of a deal. It wasn’t my money. I couldn’t keep it.”

Let's move on to the next commandment. “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16). In other words, be honest! Tell the truth!

Other Scriptures emphasizes the importance of truth telling. Proverbs 12:22 says, “Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord.” Proverbs 19:5 tells us: "A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who utters lies will not escape."

Lyingis certainly contrary to how we should live if Christ is in our life! Colossians 3:9-10 says, “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”

Honestymust define our behavior in the Church, within the Christian fellowship: “Therefore

- 2 -

each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all

members of one body” (Ephesians 4:25).

We are to speak the truth at all times! Perhaps you are thinking, "But aren’t there times when we all have to fib a little?” For instance, you're invited out to someone's house for dinner.

Something is served at the meal that you don’t like. You have a hard time getting it down. The host says, “This is a new recipe I’m trying; what do you think of it?” Do you say, “It's awful!” “Makes me want to throw up!” No, you are more inclined to hedge a bit and say, “It's good!” or "It's very tasty!" Maybe there are those times when social graces and loving consideration dictate that we fudge a bit on the truth! It reminds me of the story of the lady who baked a pie for her new pastor. She was so proud and happy. But it wasn’t really that good, and he threw it out. She later asked how he liked it. He responded, "Ma’am, pies like that don’t last long at our house!” Frankly, I can’t help but think God is too busy with “bigger things” in the world to worry about this little stuff. I’d rather stretch the truth a little bit than insult a gracious host, or crush the spirit of someone nice enough to do something kind for you.

But having said this, in the broader scope of life, it's important to tell the truth. People are hurt, and life is diminished, when lying and dishonesty are the rule.

One way we can avoid telling the truth is by covering over our mistakes and not takingresponsibility forthem.Little children sometimes will lie to avoid punishment, or blame their brother or sister for what they themselves did. Unfortunately, some adults never outgrow this! They're always putting the blame on someone else.Politicians are very skilled at this!

We can lie on our income tax reporting or padding our expense account.We can cheat in our studies and on tests.We give the impression that it is *our* work, when actually we copied from some other source. One day a teacher was passing out a trigonometry exam, and just before the students received the test the teacher spoke these words: “I’m giving you 2 tests today, one in trigonometry and one in honesty. I hope you pass both of them. But if you pass only one, be sure it’s the test in honesty because there are a lot of good people who don’t know any trigonometry, but there are no good people who are not honest.”

We can lie by pretending to be something or someone we’re not.We’re not really the person in our private life that we are in public.

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16). *We live in a culture*

*today inundated with lies! I'm talking about the news media.*

A few months ago I read a book called *Trust Me, I'm Lying. Confessions of a Media Manipulator,* by Ryan Holiday*.* It's a book that's both fascinating, and frightening. Beginning in his early 20's, Ryan Holiday began to make big bucks manipulating the news for clients. Much of the news we get originates with bloggers. These blogs range from the one person blogger sitting at his or her computer, to multi-million dollar properties like *Huffington Post, Politico, or Money Watch.* All these blogs make their money by the number of "hits" they generate – the

- 3 -

number of people who click onto the blog, thus seeing the advertising that's there. Bloggers have to produce a steady stream of posts, *every day.* Those who write the fastest and the most win – regardless of the quality of what they write. They don't have time to check sources, verify facts, correct mistakes. So, much of what we get is simply not true – or only partly true, at best. The hope is that what they write will be "traded up" and wind up in a major newspaper or on one of the television networks.

Holiday tells of being paid by a man named Tucker Max to promote a movie coming out based on Max's book *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell.* He places an ad for the movie on a billboard in Los Angeles. Then at 2 a.m. one morning on the deserted street, dressed in black, he tapes some obscene stickers on the billboard (saying Tucker Max deserves – well, I won't repeat what the sticker said). He then drives around the block and takes some photos of the billboard through the car window. As soon as he gets home he dashes off two emails to two major blogs, under a fake name. He says he saw these on his way home, and it's good to know Los Angeles hates Tucker Max too.

In less than two weeks, with no budget, he got thousands of college students to protest the movie on campuses nationwide, angry citizens trashing their billboards. FoxNews.com ran a front-page story about the backlash over the film. It got covered a number of times in the New York Post. Editorials in the *Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribute* railed against the film the week it was released.

He designed other advertisements and placed them around the country, then called and left anonymous complaints about them. He alerted college gay and lesbian groups and women's rights groups to screenings in their area and baited them to protest the offensive movie at the theater, knowing it would be covered on the nightly news. He made up preposterous stories about Tucker's behavior and reported them to gossip websites. (All this time he was being paid by Tucker Max). The outrage for the movie's creator was great enough that a few years later it was written into the television show *Portlandia.* He admits, "I guess it is safe to admit now that the entire firestorm was, essentially, fake…as the manufactured storm I created played itself out in the press, real people started believing it, and it became true."

The scary thing is that this is *just one example among many* that Ryan Holiday pulled off…and he is one among many people creating and manipulating the news we get.

One journalist who reviewed the book said: "Whenever you see a malicious online rumor costs a company millions, politically motivated fake news driving elections, a product or celebrity zooming from total obscurity to viral sensation, or anonymously sourced articles becoming national conversation, someone is behind it."

Why did Ryan Holiday come out of that world, and write this "tell-all" book? He tells us: "Because I'm tired of a world where trolls hijack debates, marketers help write the news, opinion masquerades as fact…reckless journalists spread lies, and no one is accountable for any of it."

- 4 –

He believes that much of the outrage we find in today's politics and culture is the result of deliberate manipulation by publications who want to drive traffic to their own sites, without caring which side "wins".

I share this, in some detail, because I believe it is indicative of ways our time and our culture have strayed from the wisdom in this commandment that says: Tell the truth!

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). Here again, it is a wise and loving God who's given this moral law of life for our own good. God knows that being honest, and telling the truth, is crucial if we are to have solid human relationships and a stable, healthy society!

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.*

*Community United Methodist Church*

*November 1, 2020*

- 5 -