

The Law of Freedom

Isn't it true that we live under the dispensation of grace since the days of the New Testament? Why do we still need the law? After all, isn't Christ the fulfillment of the law? And isn't love the new command that fully suffices? Numerous people are preoccupied with these as well as many similar questions. Many see the laws of God as being too stifling, and severe, but they aren't aware that it is exactly the New Testament that describes them as being the "perfect **Law of liberty**" (*James 1:25, KJV*). Its intention is to lead us to the path of freedom and toward a successful and fulfilling life. Yes indeed, it is a law whereby we can live.

(Taken from the foreword)



Wolfgang Wegert is the senior pastor of the *ARCHE* church in Hamburg, Germany, which comprises a sizable group of believers and a missionary ministry. He pastors the congregation and spends a considerable amount of time in missionary work. For many years, he has been proclaiming the Word of God on various radio and television programs as well as on crusades in Germany and Europe (especially in countries belonging to the CIS). He is passionate about re-emphasizing the basic faith principles of the great church Reformers. Pastor Wegert is married and has three grown children.



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**An Interpretation of the
Ten Commandments**

arche-medien Hamburg

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Table of Contents

Foreword.....	5
Prefatory Note.....	7
Introductory Remarks to the counting of the Ten Commandments, as they appear in number.....	9
God’s Law written on your heart.....	10
The role of the Law in the New Testament.....	14
The Fulfillment of the Law.....	19
Grace or Law – which one now?	24
The dual Law of love.....	34
Preamble:	
I am the Lord, your God	38
The First Commandment:	
Thou shalt have no other gods before me	47
The Second Commandment:	
Thou shalt not make unto thee any image	55
The Second Commandment:	
The sins of the fathers and the grace towards thousands	63
The Third Commandment:	
Do not misuse the Name of the Lord your God I.....	71
The Third Commandment:	
Do not misuse the name of God II.....	79
The Fourth Commandment:	
Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.....	83
The Fifth Commandment:	
Honour your father and your mother	93
The Sixth Commandment:	
You shall not murder I.....	102
The Sixth Commandment:	
You shall not murder II.....	112

The Seventh Commandment: You shall not commit adultery I.....	117
The Seventh Commandment: You shall not commit adultery II	127
The Eighth Commandment: You shall not steal.....	135
The Ninth Commandment: You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.....	144
The Tenth Commandment: You shall not covet.....	152

Foreword

Isn't it true that we live under the dispensation of grace since the days of the New Testament? Why do we still need the law? After all, isn't Christ the fulfillment of the law? And isn't love the new command that fully suffices? Numerous people are preoccupied with these as well as many similar questions. Many see the laws of God as being too stifling, and severe, but they aren't aware that it is exactly the New Testament that describes them as being the "*perfect Law of liberty*" (*James 1:25, KJV*). Its intention is to lead us to the path of freedom and toward a successful and fulfilling life. Yes indeed, it is a law whereby we can live.

It would also be a law that leads us to eternal life if we didn't break it. Then we would be righteous just as God is righteous. But because of our fallen state we cannot keep the laws of God. This is the biggest plight we face as human beings. Praise be to God however, He came to our rescue in the person of Jesus Christ! However, He didn't eradicate the law and replace it with something less demanding. Instead, He has given us a new nature through which we receive the competence to be keepers of His Commandments. As Christians we fail indeed, but through the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, we are able to be more and more conformed to the will of God until they are made perfect in us.

I wish for each reader, that these lessons will create within them a deeper understanding about the validity of the laws of God. Even more so, I hope that every reader will receive the new birth which will enable him or her to, never again, despair about being able to live up to the standards set by God's laws. It is in Christ Jesus that forgiveness exists for everyone who has failed God's laws. It is through Him that the power of the Holy Spirit is given so that we can enjoy the "*delight in the law of the LORD*"

(Psalm 1:2, KJV). This is when we can lead a life of happiness for now and eternity.

The texts presented are taken from sermons, which were delivered to the congregation and the missions' center of the ARCHE. In part, these have also been transmitted via television and radio to an international audience. It is my hope that the book format will be a blessing for readers also. Sometimes you might come across repetitions found in one or another message. Please, do not be disturbed by this. As a matter of fact, there is often a blessing in receiving Biblical truths more than once. As a result, a lasting impression is made on your heart and mind so that you can always access them in your day-to-day life and put them to work. That's my sincere wish for you.

Yours sincerely, Wolfgang Wegert

Hamburg, January 2001

Prefatory Note

There are two things, in my opinion, which have caused Christians to develop a negative view of God's Commandments and of a clear-cut position concerning Christian ethics.

For one, we can think of the method the Pharisees pursued in order to implement God's ordinances: They burdened God's ordinances with so many additional rules and traditions that almost everyone got the impression that virtually everything was forbidden. However, Jesus said that His laws are not burdensome; instead, they set people free. So the slogan for this book is "The Laws of God, instead of man-made laws!"

The next thing is that the laws of God have been disconnected from the work of the Holy Spirit by some people. Many will say, it's either that you live in the freedom of the Spirit, or under the yoke of the Law. Naturally, if the laws themselves were without the work of the Holy Spirit, the result would be death. However when the Holy Spirit is at work, He will create true freedom within us and bring to pass the establishment of the will of God in our hearts. What's more, the Holy Spirit possesses this will of God, being Himself the Author of the Holy Scriptures. God's Commandments are derived from God's Spirit!

We must not play off this Biblical doctrine against that one. Instead, we need to understand that they complement each other. I know of no other person who lives and teaches this principle with as much vigor as Wolfgang Wegert. In so doing, his method of speaking becomes very applicable to everyday life and can be understood by everyone. If God's Word is to become a part of our lives, we have naturally got to understand what it's saying to us! This experienced pastor, counselor, and evangelist, Wolfgang Wegert, has this knowledge and lives a life accordingly.

This truth, re-discovered by the Reformers, is able to bring about change, concerning the task of the Law and salvation by grace. At the same time it is Biblical. Equally Scriptural is the message proclaimed during the great revivals: Only the Holy Spirit can change us; we need a new move of the Spirit. Both truths belong together. It is only when they are unified, that they become the explosive stuff, affiliated to Christian ethics. This has, so often, taken the world by storm in the history of the Church. I wish, with all my heart that this book will work toward doing just that.

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² Published by RVB: Hamburg und VTR: Nürnberg, 2003, 3. edition

Introductory Remarks to the counting of the Ten Commandments, as they appear in number

Scripture does not give us any clue as to how to number the Commandments, let alone how they were displayed on the stone tablets. In Germany, we have, for instance, the so-called Heidelberg Catechism that states that the first four Commandments were shown on one tablet, and the remaining six on the other.

There are different ways of counting the Commandments. One of them is to lump the introduction – “*I am the LORD, thy God ...*” (Exodus 20:2, KJV) – and the first instruction thereafter – “*Thou shalt have no other gods before me*” (Exodus 20:3, KJV) – together, making them the First Commandment. The prohibition on any kind of engraved images – “*Thou shalt not make unto thee any ... image*” (Exodus 20:4, KJV) would thus be the Second Commandment. Any other Commandment is numbered accordingly. We have adopted this way of numbering them throughout this book.

Well-known German reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) chose a different mode when he wrote his so-called Small Catechism. He grouped the first two Commandments together, making them thus the First Commandment; he reasoned that those two Commandments were so closely related to one another that they just had to be one Commandment in total.

Consequently, what Luther refers to as the Second Commandment – “*Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain*” (Exodus 20:7, KJV) – becomes actually the Third Commandment in the Heidelberg Catechism. Accordingly, the Tenth Commandment within the Heidelberg Catechism corresponds to the Ninth and Tenth Commandment within Luther’s Small Catechism.

God's Law written on your heart³

“And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” (Ezekiel 36:27)

Are you one of those who bemoan the high crime rate, who are sick and tired of the world going rampant with fraud and indecency? Do you lament the world's lack of compassion? Don't you just long for more honesty and charity, peace and brotherly love among mankind? Guess what – the core of such yearning is nothing more than your unexpressed cry for God's Ten Commandments! Take a closer look at them and you will find that each one of them rigidly speaks out against coldness and unkindness. It becomes evident, then, that we all desire what God's Commandments comprise of. And yet, we do the exact opposite of what our deepest needs demand. We have a heart-felt longing for more kindness but act unkindly. The reason for it is simple: Due to his sinful nature, man is under a curse. The Apostle puts it this way: *“For I have the desire to do good, but I cannot carry it out” (Romans 7:18)*. Let's say, for instance, you made a resolution to tell no more lies; comes a situation where you could gain an advantage by lying, and sure enough, you break that resolution. You wanted to keep it but could not.

So we can see clearly that there is no use in pointing fingers and finding other people's behavior deplorable. We are all guilty of making the state of this world as sorrowful as it is. Why? Because we have all sinned. We don't keep God's Commandments although we so very much want to be better people.

³ Televised message, dated October 25, 1998

God changes the heart of mankind

No reason to hang your head low. I have good news for those who truly want to live a life, according to God's Commandments, and yet find it so difficult to do so. In Scripture, God tells us this: "*And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws*" (Ezekiel 36:27). It is because we cannot accomplish this that God wants to bring it to pass. He does so by pouring out His Holy Spirit into our hearts and thereby, effecting a change of our nature.

Sometimes people state that God changes His Commandments so that we can keep them more easily. There is a discussion going on even in church circles as to whether or not certain laws are pertinent to our times and if they shouldn't be replaced by certain values more applicable and relevant nowadays. Yes, even in less traditional churches where Bible-believing people gather, one can hear that God's laws are not necessary anymore, that they have been replaced by the offer of grace and through faith. By this they imply that every Christian apart from the law can define in his (or her) heart what is right and what righteousness is. However, it isn't stated anywhere in the Bible that God has changed the values He has laid down in His laws, making it easier for people to live up to ethical values.

The Ten Commandments are God's eternal and irrevocable standard. If the sinful, and eventually, helpless person doesn't see himself in a position to be able to fulfill this standard set for him, listen to this. God hasn't watered down His Truth and righteousness so that it will fit the requirements we sinners have. Instead He lifts up the person who is unable to meet them and gives him the competence to dwell within His eternal, valid Commandments. So we see that God doesn't change His laws, He changes people.

How does He do this? Let's look at what He says in His Word: "... *I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts*" (*Jeremiah 31:33*). People, however, have got such a stony heart. How can God write His laws on hearts that are as hard as stone, stubborn, coarse and without affection? I once tried to use a nail to draw on a concrete plate. The result was bloody fingers from the sheer effort and still in the long run, no one could make out what I wanted to write there. My response was "I need a softer foundation. "This is exactly what God needs so as to be able to write His laws on our hearts, laws which we'll accept, love and put into action.

God writes His laws on our hearts

This is why God gives the believer a new heart. The prophet Ezekiel expresses it this way, "*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh*" (*Ezekiel 36:26*). And then we can add the verse previously quoted, "*And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws*" (*Ezekiel 36:27*). So we see, that God places His laws in a new, and consequently, soft heart. Nowhere can God's laws be better preserved than in the heart of a person. And whatever moves our hearts that's what we tend to do.

When the Living God uses the fingers of the Holy Spirit to write His Commandments on your renewed hearts, you will have a different reaction to them. They will no longer be some sort of cold and hostile wording, that seem to be forcing you outwardly, but they will become God's invaluable and precious Commandments that move you from within. You will actually begin to love them! Your only desire will be to live and daily walk according to His righteousness that manifests itself in His Law. What is your power source to do so? Your own strength? Of course, not.

It is in Christ where you find the strength to do His will. It is Jesus who includes you in His perfect obedience so that you, in turn, can join Him in joyfully doing the will of the Father.

It is a process whereby you gradually grow into a strong and intact personality. The reason for your growth is the fact that as of now, you are now firmly anchored in God and His eternal Law. This makes you independent and gives you freedom from the many pressures of society and opinion leaders that apply money, power, and the influence of the media in order to talk you into all sorts of things they hold dear. Once God has written His truth unto your heart, your anxieties and fears of people who want to make you subject to their evil ideas, will vanish. It is then, that you will be able to walk the path of righteousness and truth, undeterred and unmoved. You will become physically, mentally and spiritually restored. Your mind set will be renewed. Others will envy you for your faith that so beautifully transformed you.

The role of the Law in the New Testament⁴

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”
(Matthew 5:17)

Let us now investigate what role the Commandments play in the New Testament. Great deals of people presume that the Gospel has replaced the Commandments. This is wrong. Didn't Jesus tell us this instead: *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them”* (Matthew 5:17). So let us take a closer look at the question:

Why must the Law remain?

The first reason why the Law is to be kept is really quite simple: **Jesus said so**. Christ is the Son of God. What He says, will happen. That's why He calls out: *“I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished”* (Matthew 5:18). Paul reinforces this fact, writing: *“Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law”* (Romans 3:31). So the gospel does under no circumstances put an end to the Law or ask for its abolition. Instead, the gospel confirms the Law. Jesus does not refrain from speaking about the Law to His New Testament disciples. He makes it a major topic, expounding on it and teaching it. He has no intention of putting the Law aside but shows His disciples how to understand it more fully. They need not so much adhere to the letter of the Law but rather to the underlying meaning of it. The Law is set forever and

⁴ Radio message, dated October 18, 1998

always. That's why His disciples were asked to understand it perfectly. The same is still true for us.

The Law, however, must remain unchanged **because of its nature**. What do I mean when I say this? God's divine Law has got the same character as God himself and that is the character of being unchangeable. What was Law in His sight yesterday will be Law today. What truth represented in the olden days, remains the same today, and what was once thought of as being pure, must remain as being pure before God today. This is so because, just as the eternal God Himself is unchangeable, and His counsel irrevocable, His laws remain unwavering in the very same way. "*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away*", Jesus says in Matthew 24:35. Sometimes God is portrayed as a person who realized, late, that He had placed too much on the shoulders of mankind. The next step in this portrayal insinuates that He then played down the standards set by the Commandments in the New Testament; eventually the more lenient Law of Salvation by faith replaced this standard. However, God isn't a man. He did not make a mistake. Therefore it shouldn't be thought that He needed to alter His laws.

What's more, even before the Commandments were given on Mount Sinai, they had had validity. God had already implanted His Law within the nature of His creation. Even when Adam lived in the Garden of Eden, it was no less of a Law that he would love his Creator with all his heart, and it was a sin to go against the will of God. Regardless of the fact that the times have changed and will go on changing in the future, it was and remains wrong to lie, to steal, to kill, or to commit adultery. If there is anyone who wants to change the Law, he will have to be willing to change God as well. Love and Truth are still a component of the eternal nature of God. To lessen the rules laid down by the Law, and to equate evil with purity would mean the

same as separating God from His holiness and presenting Him as being, no longer, the whole Truth Himself.

Paul says: “*So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good*” (Romans 7:12). So it is absolutely perfect. When men take that which is absolutely perfect and change it they imply that it wasn’t absolutely perfect in the first place. Otherwise they wouldn’t have the desire to change it. If God really had to change something that He has established in His Law, He wouldn’t have called it holy, righteous and good. The Law of God is, and remains eternally, perfect, without any qualification. So just looking at the nature of God we can conclude that it couldn’t be changed.

The knowledge of sin is a result of the Law

It is also **extremely dangerous** to want to change or even eradicate God’s Commandments. By doing so, we would erase the tool that the Holy Spirit uses to convict us of our sins. He causes the sinner to see the holiness of God by revealing the unachievable demands of the Law. Paul writes in Romans 7:7: “*Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law*”. In verse 9, he states, “*but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life*” (Romans 7:9). If we erased the Law, we would do away with the very thing that is needed to disclose sin to us. Sin is a violation of the Law. If the Law is erased, then the knowledge of knowing what sin is would also be erased.

One could possibly compare the Law to the ability to feel pain. If we were to extract the ability to sense pain from our bodies, we would overlook our illnesses and not visit the doctor. That’s why we should thank God for this mechanism by which we are sensitive to pain, even when it hurts. It allows us to be aware of the defects we have within ourselves. So we want to thank God also for this perfect Law, as painful as it may appear, because it reveals to us

the defects we carry within our own hearts. In so doing, we will seek Jesus, the doctor of our souls. However, when we try to water down or erase the Law, the knowledge of sin will be also erased and Christ will mean little or nothing to us. We will believe we don't really need Him, because we will be unable to see how lost we are. It is very dangerous then, to want to eradicate the Law. For this reason, let us praise God for His perfect Law because it is the measure by which we get to see how absolutely lost we are. May the Holy Spirit put the holy Law to use in you today so that you may be able to recognize your sin.

The Law drives us to Christ

In connection with this we will clearly recognize, that the Law itself doesn't save us. You might compare it to pain, which cannot heal us either. God gave us the Commandments so that we may comprehend that we urgently require help and salvation. We need His holy and perfect Law in order to recognize how hopeless a state we are in – a state of condemnation. The Law works like a razor-sharp knife that cuts out any such idea that we could possibly bring about salvation by our own good works.

This is where we find another potential pitfall. If anyone claims the Commandments of the New Testament were made a lighter burden to carry, he implies that one could try indeed to produce one's own righteousness. This in turn, would mean that we no longer need to rely on Christ and the Salvation He brought us. Woe to us if we belittle or despise the Law. By doing so, we rob mankind of the pedagogue or taskmaster that is meant to lead us to Christ. That's the kind of wording Paul chooses when he refers to the Law: *“So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24)*. We will always fail with regards to the Law, that's our curse. And yet, due to the despair we feel about this we are driven

into faith. If you haven't felt this despair, you won't know what the faith that saves us is all about. So, once again, woe to the one who wants to abolish this taskmaster.

One verse before, the Apostle states: "*Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by law, locked up until faith should be revealed*" (Galatians 3:23). The Law is thus a prison for us. A necessary one. The Holy Spirit puts us there so that we will cry out for salvation. Only if you experience this kind of imprisonment by the Law, will you call out for salvation. You need to first join Paul in his despair, as he shouts: "*What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*" (Romans 7:24). Next, you will be able to praise God. Evidently, it could have never been Jesus' intention to abandon the Law. And woe to those, whose minds are set on putting even the smallest Commandment aside.

Of course, once you found salvation in Christ, you are no longer under the Law. That's when we can gladly proclaim: "*Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law*" (Galatians 3:25). Without this taskmaster, however, we would have never walked the path of faith.

Make no mistake, therefore: Whosoever abolishes the Law also does away with the Gospel. It is our duty then to preach God's Law so that people get a clue of their hopelessness. The Law is incorruptible, and if we don't preach it this way, no heart will be gripped and consequently, no true repentance will manifest itself. You might, for example, try your very best to keep the Commandment of love. Nevertheless, you fail over and over again. The taskmaster is literally driving you crazy until you eventually cry out in despair: "God, have mercy upon me. I am nothing but a sinner!" May the Lord grant you the revelation of this truth.

The Fulfillment of the Law⁵

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them”
(Matthew 5:17)

God’s Law cannot be cast aside for it is *“holy, righteous and good”* (Romans 7:12). Therefore, it must be fulfilled. We, however, are unable to do just that. We all failed and still do in view of the perfection of this divine Law. No matter how hard we try, how earnest our effort, our sinful flesh is too weak for this task. The path the Law paves leads to failure. We need to take a different path.

Once and for all, we need to come to grips with the fact that only God’s saving grace can provide the way out. We need to believe in Jesus Christ who fulfilled all of the Law. Our entire hope rests on Him, the One who neither abandoned nor watered down the Law but met all the requirements of it. As a result of this, we may now – fully undeserving – reap and enjoy the fruit of His obedience. Let us now study in more detail just how Jesus fulfilled the Law.

Jesus fulfilled the Law in the life He lived

First of all, our Savior fulfilled the Law in His own life on earth. He fulfilled it in that He was completely obedient. To sin is to be in violation of God’s Law, but Jesus never sinned and therefore never broke the laws of His heavenly Father. What might sometimes have seemed in His life as being a violation was an infringement of regulations and traditions that the people had added to the laws. He himself was never in breach of the Law. He wasn’t only acquainted with the letter, but also with the Spirit that many people overlook. The fact is that Jesus together with His Father was the author of the Law. Since He was Lord of the Law,

⁵ Radio message, dated October 25, 1998

why shouldn't He be fully submissive to the Law that He Himself had created?! He suffered temptations because of the weakness of His own flesh, but praise be to God, He remained without sin (Hebrews 4:15).

It was because of this accomplishment in Christ that Paul wrote: *“For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous”* (Romans 5:19). The holy Law cannot demand less than to be fulfilled by an unblemished life. Every believer is now really in a position to present a life that fits just such a demand of the Law. Take note of this important point, however: It is not our own life but the spotless one of Jesus Christ that we are privileged to present. Why that? Because we are united with Christ, the One whom the Father made our righteousness. The obedience that Christ showed towards the Law is viewed as if we had done so. Owing to this fact, Scripture says: *“Christ is the end of the law, so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes”* (Romans 10:4). Please, take heed. This verse does not state the Law is no longer valid. We have already pointed out that the Law is applicable always and will remain that way eternally. By the same token, the Law has been fulfilled through Christ on behalf of all believers; it has no more grip on the children of God. The Law has come to an end with us since it was fulfilled in our glorious Head Jesus Christ. Praise onto our beloved Savior for being fully obedient in His life on earth.

Jesus fulfilled the Law by His sacrificial gift at the Cross

Secondly, the Son of God fulfilled the Law by His unparalleled sacrifice at the Cross of Calvary. The Bible says, *“Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy”* (Hebrews 10:28). Somewhere else, we can read, *“The soul who sins is the one who will die”* (Ezekiel

18:20). Without a doubt, the righteousness of the Law requires the death of the trespasser. If you don't keep the Law, it asks for justice to be done, i.e. corporate punishment. Being the Head of our Covenant, Jesus took this punishment upon Himself. He satisfied the Law in laying His life down for us. Jesus settled the bill that, according to the Law, we were still supposed to pay. The result? The Law has become quiet and finds itself at peace. Punishment for the transgression was carried out and rests "*upon him*", i.e. on Christ, something "*that brought us peace*" (Isaiah 53:5).

So Jesus fulfilled the Law for us in a twofold way: On the one hand, by His complete obedience, on the other in His death whereby He carried the punishment the righteous Law called due and which we would have to pay. Our Redeemer fulfilled the Law twice. He did it for you and for me. So let us lift Him up from the bottom of our hearts.

Christ fulfills the Law in us

There is yet another way that Christ fulfills the Law. He fulfills it in us when He implants a new nature into us and indwells us by His Spirit. What happens then is that the perfect Christ produces holy living within us. The starting point of it all is when a person becomes born again, i.e. the moment the Living God breathes His divine Spiritual life unto us. Scripture calls it "*the law of Spirit of life*" (Romans 8:2). No wonder, then, that John states, "*We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin*" (1 John 5:18). A person born of God will have a strong aversion against sin. It is Christ within Who is the cause of this attitude. The book of Galatians testifies to this fact: "*I no longer live, but Christ lives in me*" (2:20). What it means is that we no longer wrestle with the single letter of the Law but entrust ourselves to Christ Who indwells us so that He can lead us into faithfully keeping the Law.

And surely He will, for He loves the Law and fulfills it in us. Let me put it this way: When you are born again and are being made holy, the Law is fulfilled within you. Christ enters your heart. And when He sanctifies you, He actually transforms you into His likeness, i.e. the perfect keeping of the Law. That's basically what it means: We are conformed to His image, become more and more like Him – Him, Who was obedient and spotless before the eternally valid Law. Such righteousness we cannot produce if we rely on our own flesh. Instead, it is Christ Who moulds us into it. He shapes and chisels us so that we increasingly measure up to the standard of the holy Law until we eventually enter God's glory without any blemishes or spots at all. Therefore, Jesus can only proclaim: *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them”* (Matthew 5:17). That's exactly what He does within us. He alone is capable of meeting the righteous requirements of the Law, a truth Paul explicitly shares with us in Romans 8:3-4.

So let me ask you this: Do you personally want to undertake the task of fulfilling the Law? Or would you rather ask Jesus to do it within you? Nobody but He Himself is able to do that. So be encouraged to give yourself to your Savior and to receive His saving grace and truth. He is the only One Who can change you into something meaningful and fit for His glory.

Living by the grace of God

There are many Christians who haven't come to terms with this spiritual truth yet. They still believe they can depend on their own strength to offer their obedience and faithfulness to their Father in Heaven. The Bible, however, tells us something different. According to Scripture, only Christ can and will cause righteousness within you. The problem is home-made when you want to work your way

up to God, presenting yourself as perfect to Him: it is an undertaking that is unnecessarily burdensome. Do not put a yoke on yourself by attempting to observe the Law (cf. Galatians 3:10) which nobody can fully meet. It is not our job to pay attention to the mere letters of the Law but to break down in repentance because of the requirements of the Law. Only God's mercy can save us and we need to ask for it. Let me put it more precisely still: **Faith means nothing but our surrender; we can in no way fulfill the requirements of the holy Law and have no hope unless we yield to the loving arms of Jesus and believe that He can accomplish what we are unable to do.** Our hope is solely based on becoming one with Christ. So, please learn this lesson: In all circumstances, be content with everything that He graciously gives you.

Perhaps you often fail in being a better spouse. Or maybe, you practically never succeed in overcoming a certain degree of ungodliness or your habitual sins, even though you try as hard as you can. Whatever your situation, stop depending on your own efforts and will-power. Instead, hand it all over to Jesus. Trust Him that He is able to put away with your evil inclinations and desires. Go look for a quiet place, a hide-away sort of, where you can meet your Savior. That's the perfect venue for allowing Him to shatter and crush your self-confidence. Let Him show you that the one thing you need is His grace. Feel free to cry before Him as you repent of your transgressions, and be amazed subsequently, when you receive His grace and mercy, when He becomes the Captain of your life. Let yourself be delighted by what He can make out of you!

Grace or Law – which one now?⁶

“If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love”

(John 15:10)

We have already dealt with the fact that God can write His Law on the hearts of men. The tablets that God gave Moses were made of stone. This underlines that the Law is valid forever and always. And now, God engraves His Law onto the hearts of His children. As a result of this act of grace, His children are empowered to keep His commands. It is the Holy Spirit that enables the believers and helps them walk the path of righteousness.

Two sides of a coin

Accepting seemingly contradicting Biblical truths are stumbling blocks for many a person: On the one side, the Bible admonishes the children of God to keep His Commandments, to love them and to meditate upon them day and night (Psalm 1:2).

On the other side of the coin, we often imply that God’s grace is abundant and that it doesn’t really matter if we behave badly or perform well. After all, aren’t we made holy by faith and God’s grace? Isn’t that what I often emphasize in my own sermons?

Apparently, we need some clarification here. Possible misunderstandings must be addressed head-on. So let me tackle both truths separately once again and shed more light on them.

There are Christians out there who have a problem with a sermon that states we are saved by grace alone and that God’s grace suffices to keep us in all our ways; they wonder if this doesn’t make God’s children carefree about sin,

⁶ Sermon delivered on August 09, 1998

discipleship, and obedience. Are you aware of the fact that even Paul had to deal with such reservations? According to Romans 6:1, people accused him of encouraging believers to sin even more so that grace could abound. Paul spotted the underlying misunderstanding of such view and replied something like this: “How can the doctrine of grace that I preach, lead you into jumping to such conclusions? Haven’t we died to sin that we should still indulge in it? Haven’t we been redeemed?” In the Apostle’s own words, we can read: *“We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” (Romans 6:2)*. With regards to the Law, Paul has this to say: *“Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law!” (Romans 3:31)*.

So Paul also had to reconcile those two seemingly conflicting truths. We find him saying: “Live by grace alone!” Then, in another verse of Scripture, he upholds the Law again. It is of utmost importance both for a richer understanding of the gospel and our daily walk with Christ that we get to the bottom of this issue.

Grace causes us to keep the commands

In Colossians 1:28-29, the Apostle explains: *“We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.”* Please, also note what he says in 1 Corinthians 15:10: *“I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”*

We are still trying to find an answer to the question: “Grace or Law – which one now?” It is helpful in this context to ask yet another fundamental question first: Is my motive for keeping the Law and doing good that I want to attain God’s grace? Or is rather grace itself that works within me and makes me love His Law and want to serve Him?

In other words, it is a joy and great pleasure to me to have God's Law written on my heart and do keep it in my daily walk with Him because He so graciously imparted His Holy Spirit to me. The idea of obeying Him because it could make me righteous before Him is foreign to me. As a born-again believer, I have an entirely different relationship to the Law than ever before. That's why Jesus lets us know in John 14:15: *"If you love me, you will obey what I command"*. Did you notice? Jesus did not say: "If you want my grace and eternal life, you will have to keep my commands."

A child of God that deems the Ten Commandments outdated; that follows a lifestyle as he or she sees fit; and states that the Holy Spirit will lead him or her accordingly, is wrong. I'm forced to tell such person that he or she does not live in the Spirit. Look at the difference, if you will. A Spirit-filled Christian rejoices over the Law of the Lord because the Holy Spirit will never reject or despise the Law but rather confirm it.

Picking up on Matthew 5:18-19, you will find that Jesus says the same: *"... until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven."* Jesus did not abolish the Law either. In the Sermon on the Mount, He simply interpreted it and expounded on its sense and deeper meaning. **God did not change His Commandments. He changed our hearts so that He could write His Law onto our hearts.**

God made Ezekiel His mouthpiece when He declared: *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to fol-*

low my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” (Ezekiel 36:26-27). Spirit and Law, in one sentence! God basically tells us: “By my Spirit you are enabled to overcome your opposition to my commands; instead, you will learn to love and keep them joyfully.” Christians who obey His Commandments are no mere hearers of His Word; these believers are doers of the Word of God; they are truly Spirit-filled!

God’s children who keep His Commands but don’t practice speaking in tongues are Spirit-filled as well. I cannot stress this truth enough. As a matter of fact, they happen to be even more Spirit-filled than those believers who do speak in tongues but fail to keep God’s Law in their day-to-day lives. Yes, I do realize that I’m walking on thin ice here. Some people might accuse me of underestimating the gift of speaking in tongues. Not at all, is my reply. I am in full agreement, however, with the Apostle Paul, who states: “*Even if we spoke in tongues of angels and possessed all the other gifts also but had no love, it would all be in vain*” (paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 13:1). The Law of Love perfectly sums up the entire Law. This is the crucial point. The gifts that are given for the edification of the body of Christ could be seen as being added onto the Law of Love. God’s will is laid down in the Commandments. People who are enabled to do His Will will strengthen the body of Christ.

Christ – the end of the Law

“Wait a minute,” I can already hear some Christians exclaiming now. “What about Romans 10:4? Read for yourself. *‘Christ is the end of the law.’*” True. We should, however, ascertain that we understand what kind of law Paul is talking about. Paul certainly does not speak of the validity of the Law. Remember, the Law is valid eternally.

What Paul means is that since Christ came, believers are no longer under judgment. Christ carried the punishment

we would have deserved. He Himself bore what the Law rightfully demanded (cf. Galatians 3:13: 1 Peter 2:24). That's why we can go free, unpunished. Obviously then, Christ is the end of the Law for us.

Let us review the broader context of the Bible passage in Romans 10:4 to grasp better what Paul actually means. The Greek word that we frequently translate as “*end*” originally stands for “goal”. In light of this, the message of the verse would thus be, “Christ is the goal of the Law”. This would definitely imply that certain things do come to an end then, and that certain rules and regulations God ordained beforehand, are no longer applicable today.

In Romans 9:32-33, Paul picks up a picture of the Old Testament. The Jews are walking the path of the Law when they suddenly bump into a stone. Paul identifies this “stumbling-stone” as Jesus. It was God Himself Who “*lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall*” (Isaiah 8:14). So even in Old Testament days Jesus was the One Who brought about an occasion for a decision. He literally lay on the path of the Law; or rather He was the “goal”, the “final point of the Law”, as we can derive from Romans 10:4. In other words, you couldn't just pass Him by. Christ has always been the One to lead us to the point of decision-making. Jews, however, “stumbled over the stumbling-stone”⁷. They preferred continuing on the path of the Law. It was as if the path itself had become their goal. They didn't want to be stopped by such a stumbling-stone. What did they overlook? They didn't notice that this very stumbling-block marked the end of the path. They failed to see that anybody who reached this stone had also reached his or her final destination. This finishing line even promised protection and refuge because “*the one who*

⁷The Greek language allows a play on words here.

trusts will never be dismayed” (Isaiah 28:16⁸). This promise, however, applied only to those who understood the significance of the stumbling-stone. To all the believers, Jesus is thus not only the “stumbling-stone” but equally well the “rock of salvation”⁹.

There is a third aspect pertaining to the full meaning of the verse we are presently studying; “*Christ is the end of the law*” (Romans 10:4). The Mosaic Law can be divided into three different segments: the Ceremonial Law, the Civil Law, and the Moral Law. Let us focus on the **Ceremonial Law** first. This law stipulated everything related to serving in the house of God and the sacrificial offerings brought to the Lord there. It stated, for instance, which animals had to be sacrificed and in which way this was to be done; another example of it concerned details on purification etc.

What about the **Civil Law**? To a large extent, the Mosaic Law provided details on the jurisdiction of the state of Israel. An example of this is the law that stipulates “*eye for eye, tooth for tooth*” (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21). Too bad the Pharisees abused it for the purpose of self-justice (cf. Matthew 5:38) although only the state was authorized to deal with violations of this law – something Paul reminds us of also in Romans 13:4: “*He [= the one in authority] does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer*”.

Some Christians have the opinion that one should institute the laws of ancient Israel in other countries as well. In passing, please note that this was partly done in the German Basic Law. The reason for such view is that there was a

⁸ Quoted according to the Greek translation of the Old Testament (The Septuagint).

⁹ cf. Matthew 7:24-25; Psalm 31:3-4; 40:3; 42:10; 62:8; Isaiah 26:4; 1 Corinthians 10:4; 1 Peter 2:8).

blessing on Israel's Civil Law. I am convinced that the primary job of the body of Christ is not to engage in political activities – although there are brothers and sisters who have received such a calling from God.

Let us now have a look at the **Moral Law**, which is actually made up of eternally valid, ethic laws; this especially holds true for the Ten Commandments.

There are numerous pieces of evidence that justify the division between Ceremonial and Moral Law. Let us lavish our attention on a few of them. *“Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? **To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams**” (1 Samuel 15:22).* A similar verse can be found in Hosea 6:6: *“For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.”* If we read the books of the Old Testament prophets, over and over again you hear them bemoan the fact that the people of Israel profess much when it comes to beautiful services of worship and the precise execution of the various ceremonies but perform little with regards to their daily walk with God and His Law (Isaiah 1:11-17; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8; Zechariah 7:5-10, amongst others).

In picking up from where we left off earlier, we can now put things into perspective. When the verse says, *“Christ is the end of the law”*, it also means that Christ is the end of all ceremonial offerings. Please, turn to Hebrews 10:8-10 with me. With reference to Psalm 40:6-8, we can read: *“First he said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them’ (although the law required them to be made). Then he said, ‘Here I am, I have come to do your will.’ He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”*

Since the new thing has arrived, the old one is cancelled. We no longer deal with symbols that foreshadow Christ but the reality of His sacrificial gift; consequently, laws concerning offerings and purification are not relevant anymore. Paul had something very similar to say in Acts 15:1-29 and Galatians 5:2-3, which we may paraphrase like this: “Those Jewish believers in Christ that try to impose laws related to the Ceremonial Law, on their fellow-Christian brothers and sisters are not walking the path of the gospel. For Christ is the end of the Law. In Him, we find the Ceremonial Law fulfilled.”

The Moral Law, however, is valid forever more; it is summed up in the Ten Commandments and expounded on in the Sermon on the Mount. You are dead wrong if you think Christ is a replacement of, or the Holy Spirit an alternative to, the Law. This is not the good news the gospel proclaims. God is the same always. He never changes. He remains the same yesterday, today, and forever and always. What was true a thousand or ten thousand years ago is still true today. What was a lie then is a lie also in our times. The Moral Law God gave us will never change.

So this is the background to making the Ten Commandments the subject of this book. I feel it is extremely important to the body of Christ to gain a profound understanding of God’s will, as expressed in His Law. It also serves to get to know Him better. In turn, we will adore Him even more and can be more instrumental to His plans and purposes for us.

How did God really reveal Himself to us? The Ten Commandments come to mind, of course. At the same time, it is our realization that not one of us is capable of keeping them. Not a single person can claim he will receive God’s righteousness on account of his ability to fully meet God’s standards. We cannot become righteous and holy, unless we accept the sacrificial gift Christ offers us. There is no way

apart from Him because He is the One Who died for our sins and thereby fulfilled the entire Law. Jesus is the key to the Law. It comes as no surprise, then, that Jesus tells us in John 14:15: *“If you love me, you will obey what I command”*. Please, also note what He states in John 15:14: *“You are my friends if you do what I command.”*

Summary

To sum up then: The major change that the children of God experience in their lives is a new birth. God changes your heart and the relationship you have with Him. When you were an unbeliever, you were ruled by the flesh; you used to hate God, you rebelled against His Word, and lived a life of sin and transgressions. In brief, you were God’s enemy. Luke 19:4 puts it this way: *“We don’t want this man to be our king.”* That is the attitude of the unsaved person. Then however, the Holy Spirit intervened in a wonderful way. This takes place when a person is born again. God planted something divine in you, a new way of thinking, so that you would be a partaker of a divine nature. Suddenly you notice that you are different, because you begin to love the Commandments of God and live by them with joy. It can now be said that we are a *“new creation”* (2 Corinthians 5:17), one that is now made in the likeness of God. When we see things in this light the difference should be evident between those who belong to the body of Christ and those who are of the world. Of course, it is frightening and depressing to see the way in which sin is multiplying more and more. It is equally scary to observe people in their blindness and state of being lost, distancing themselves further and further from God.

Our task as children of God isn’t one of running to and fro with a pointed finger of accusation in a world that is lost. Nor are we to be indignant about how terrible it is that the Commandments of God are disregarded. Let us rather

aim for a transformation by the Spirit of God so that we'll become people in whose hearts the Law of God is written. In turn, we will have joy, not only in meditating on the Law, but also in living by it in every way. Sadly the danger also exists, that we could become entangled in observing the letters of the Law instead of understanding and following the deeper meaning of the Commandments.

That's why, for us, there is no contradiction between Law and grace. God's grace is all important. It enables us to be Christ's (by repentance and rebirth) and to remain His (by sanctification). Does all of this make the Law an unnecessary factor? Quite the opposite is the case. We realize by the Law that we would never be able to pass the test. It becomes evident to us that we are desperately in need of the grace He extends to us. The Law causes us to see how sinful we are and thus sends us in search of Christ. When we become Christians, we live by the grace of God, and will want to do His will. We can do this because His Spirit reveals it to us through His Word, especially through those Words laid down in His Commandments. When you remain constantly in touch with God, the Holy Spirit "*guides you in all truth*" (John 16:13). He helps us to "*not turn aside to the right or to the left*" (Deuteronomy 5:32; Joshua 1:7; 26:6).

The dual Law of love¹⁰

“Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

(Matthew 22:37-40)

Let us try to imagine the following. You’re conversing with someone you know. During the course of this conversation, the person asks the question: What can one really expect from a Christian? You think together about the possible answers and come up with a few. One might be: A Christian, naturally, must always be honest and helpful. Other attributes that occur to you might be: The willingness to forgive, kindness, tolerance, and meekness. Maybe you’re thinking to yourself: “In reality, I’m a good example for a Christian. I’ve never killed another person. I say the truth most of the times, and I’m always helpful. By-the-way, I also donate a few hundred dollars to assist in the delivery of food-aid in areas of crisis.” But is that all there is to it? Is our beloved Christianity only a thing of humanity adorned with a few religious words in-between? In actuality, many think this way. They reason: Didn’t that renowned German philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once say something like this, “Nobel is mankind, helpful and good”?! Isn’t that where the real difference lies? Isn’t it of much more importance how a person lives and much rather of secondary and less importance what he believes in?

The greatest Commandment

The Bible says that one day, a Pharisee came to Jesus and asked Him, *“Teacher, which is the greatest Com-*

¹⁰ Televised message, delivered on November 08, 1998

mandment in the Law?” (Matthew 22:36). Jesus replied, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Mathews 22:37-40).

So the priority Jesus sets is quite clear: Love God first, then love your neighbor. His “*first and greatest commandment*” says “*Love the Lord, your God*”. This is by no means a new Law that Jesus gives but a Law that has been around since the Old Testament days (cf. Deuteronomy 6:5; 10:12 and 30:6). You might wonder how it is at all possible to love God; or perhaps you don’t know what it really means to love Him. Such questions are fully justified because mankind is not able to love God based on his own strength. We simply don’t possess the kind of love that God desires and requires. God provides the way out of this dilemma: He blesses everybody who turns to Him with His divine love. In his letter to the Romans, Paul puts it this way: “*God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit*” (5:5). What does that mean? Every person who was privileged to start a new life with God carries God’s love in his heart. It is this love that God is willing to give us in His grace that enables us to love Him. Unless God has given us His love, we are not capable of loving Him. Once He does, we are indeed able to return His love and fulfill, what Jesus calls, the “*first and greatest commandment*”.

Loving God – how do you do that?

So what does it actually mean what Jesus asks us to do: Love God – “*with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind*”? It means nothing less than to love Him with everything we are and what makes us a person. To start with, we entrust Him with our lives and He changes

our priorities concerning Him. Whether riches or splendid job prospects, things like these can no longer be the focal points in our lives. From now on, it is God Who takes pre-eminence. To love God also extends to trusting His Word and to accepting it as true and mandatory. You might not understand everything at once. If you love the Lord, however, you trust Him that He will lead you in these matters also, so that gradually, you will gain understanding and wisdom. In passing, we should underline the fact that you don't need to unplug your brains when you study the Bible. On the contrary! You may rest assured that God continuously grants you insight into Scripture and personally offers you guidance for your day-to-day life.

Loving others as a result

If you love God, you will gladly use His Word as your guideline for your life. You will then discover that Jesus does not stop at the First Commandment of loving God; in fact, He adds: *“And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself”* (Matthew 22:39). Jesus once again does not quote any new Commandment here but refers to one that God gave His people, Israel, in the days of the Old Testament (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus actually repeats the commandment of loving God first, and your neighbor second. This view on love we already found in the Ten Commandments: The first few Commandments deal with our love for God, e.g. *“I am the LORD your God. You shall have no other gods before me.”* (Exodus 20:2-3); *“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God”* (Exodus 20:7). In the second half of the Ten Commandments, God shows us how to treat others, e.g. *“You shall not murder”*; *“You shall not commit adultery”*; *“You shall not steal”*; *“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor”*; *“You shall not covet ...”* (Exodus 20:13-17).

Initially, I enumerated some of the qualities one would expect a Christian to have: Honesty, helpfulness, meekness etc. Surely, expecting to find these characteristics in a Christian is fully justified. In fact, God wants us to behave like that. Having a heart for others becomes thus a bit of a hallmark for authentic Christianity. Jesus put the Law of loving your neighbor on a par with the Command of loving God. If, however, anyone feels it is enough to love God only, that person has no living faith. Please, note how outspoken James is in regards to this fact: *“Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17).*

On the other hand, it does not suffice to love your neighbor only and to disregard the love for God. I’m afraid this would be mere social activism. The inner relationship you have with God always takes priority before your outer relationship with others. If your life with God isn’t right, your life with others won’t be right either. If you fail to give honor to the Living God, you will equally fail to honor your fellow-men. If you sin against people, you have already sinned against God beforehand. If you are unjust towards others, you became godless prior to this. If you lost touch with God, your conscience pertaining to your actions towards others won’t be active anymore. These facts do not only apply on an individual level. They also hold for societies at large. The more a country forsakes God, the more violent, inconsiderate, and insensitive its people will behave. The opposite is true as well. In other words, a person who is at peace with God has His divine Love in his heart and will love his neighbor.

So God wants both. He asks us to love Him with all our heart. At the same time, He wants us to relay His love to others. Do you wish you had more love for the person next door? Then stop trying to make those wonderful resolutions. Instead, go to God and ask Him to give you this love. This love – His love – will empower you to love Him first and others as well. May God grant you the desire of your heart!

Preamble: I am the Lord, your God¹¹

“I am the LORD, your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”

(Exodus 20:1-2)

We can very well call the opening sentence of the Ten Commandments a “preamble”. Typically, you can find this expression as some sort of an official introductory remark in documents like the constitution of a country or an agreement between governments. In our Biblical preamble that opens the way to the Ten Commandments, God chooses to introduce Himself first.

The Commandments – given by God to His people

The preamble tells us that it was God Himself Who gave the Commandments to His people. They are not the clever invention of man; no psychologist or member of a committee on ethics ever thought them up. The truth of the matter is that the Author of the Ten Commandments is no other than the Living God Himself.

The verse above draws attention to the fact that God is “*Yahweh*”; some Bible translations also render the name “*Jehovah*” here¹². These names mean “*I am the LORD*”, or

¹¹ Sermon, delivered on August 16, 1998

¹² Please note that we don’t refer to the Bible of the so-called “Jehovah’s witnesses”.

“Jehovah” is actually a pretty artificial word really that can be traced back to a medieval misunderstanding. Jews who lived in the days after the Bible was written, tried to avoid using the name of God, “Yahweh”; their reasoning was to honor God by not doing so. Both Hebrew and Arabic happen to lack letters for their vowels. In the early Middle Ages, pronunciation aids for vowels (little dots and lines) were added to the Hebrew text of the Bible. This way the consonants that used to make up the name of God (JHWH) were connected to the vowels of the Hebrew expression for “Lord”. The idea was to remind the reader of the fact that he wasn’t

“I am the I am”. Whenever the Hebrew original uses the word “Yahweh”, the English translation will employ the capitalized form of Lord, “*LORD*”.

Before God disclosed His will to His people, He stated something very clearly: He is the Lord, the God of the covenant Who led His people out of their captivity in Egypt into freedom. God never entered into such a covenant with any other people; nor did any other people ever receive laws from Him. We are aware of the fact though that one day He will judge all other peoples and nations on the basis of these Commandments. We may say, then, that the divine covenant as expressed in the Ten Commandments, is a precious treasure for the people of Israel. As you might know, the stone tablets were kept in the Arch of the Covenant and accompanied the Israelites right up to their destination of the Promised Land of Canaan.

Moses received the Commandments on Mont Sinai. They were ascribed to two areas of life. The first tablet displayed those Commandments that laid down the relationship between God and man; the second one showed those that detailed us on how to treat each other.

It grieves me when people say: “Sure I have respect for the Commandments, I mean the ones that deal with how people are supposed to live with one another; *‘You shall not steal’* is something that I can support anytime but a Commandment like *‘You shall have no other gods before me’*, well, to be quite honest, that’s going a bit too far for me!”

What these people are saying is basically that they are willing to acknowledge those Commandments that ask for more charity and humanity among men; this is nothing foreign to them in view of the fact that those Commandments became laws in some way or another anyhow – take the

supposed to articulate the name of God; instead he was to simply use the word “Lord” (which is in Hebrew: “Adonai”).

German Basic Law as an example. The moment, however, you mention the Commandments that were written on the first stone tablet, the picture quickly changes. Those Commandments cut the line. Honoring God, serving Him alone, paying respect to His name, adoring Him – these are commands that most people don't want to accept any longer.

God does not allow that. He does not agree to it when people pick, choose and refuse His Commandments. Once you climb a wall and get past it, you managed all of it – not just a part of it. If someone asserts he loves God with all his heart and does what the first stone tablet requires, he will also need to put the Commandments of the second tablet to work. If not, he only pays lip service to God and breaks all of the Law (cf. James 2:10). The same is true for someone who does not believe in God and even denies Him but ever so often, lends a hand to his neighbor. A philanthropist like that is still a trespasser of God's Law. All of the Commandments are from God, no matter which stone tablet you look at!

First grace, then the Law

Our introductory verse above enlightens us also about the specific time when God gave His Commandments. Let us browse through it once again: *"I am the LORD, your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."* Prior to handing down His Commandments, God reminded His people of the fact that it was He Himself Who set them free from slavery in Egypt. We could, therefore, say: **Before God supplied His Law, He showed His great mercy to His people!**

He first redeemed His chosen people from slavery and oppression; afterwards, He provided them with His Law as His love gift. They received freedom first, then God's Law. That's the reason why James calls the Ten Commandments *"the Law of Freedom"*; please, turn to chapter 1:25 with

me: “*The man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does.*”

According to the Bible, God’s Law cannot be equated with harshness, sternness, and unnecessary constraint. It is a Law that gives freedom. James picks up on this expression again in chapter 2:12. Apparently, Law and freedom do not contradict each other. The opposite is true. Anyone who wants to be free by abolishing God’s Law gets deeply entangled in slavery. We need to note something important here. God did not set a condition for His people in that they had to accept the Law first, before they could be released from Egypt. Did He stipulate the following: “Listen, here is my Law. If you follow it and obey everything laid down in it, I will reward you and take you across the Red Sea into freedom”? In no way at all did God ever say anything like that. Instead, He chose His people and poured out His grace upon them – no conditions attached. He first saved them. Then, when they were free, He gave them the Commandments. As we can clearly gather from this, both freedom and Law belong together.

What does the Apostle Paul mean when he says to the children of God: “*We have been released from the law*” (cf. *Romans 7:6*). Does he advocate the cancellation of the Law? Absolutely not! He proclaims the fact that we are no longer judged by the Law because Jesus bore the punishment of our trespasses when He died for us. German reformer Martin Luther once put it this way¹³: “For Christ has freed us from the curse of the Law, not from obedience to it.”¹⁴

¹³ 1532, sermon on Galatians

¹⁴ Quoted as found in the book by Thomas Schirrmacher: *Law or Spirit? – an alternative view of Galatians*. RVB: Hamburg, 2001. p. 6

The Bible makes God's Law an integral part of the freedom we can enjoy living in. Corresponding to this, Psalm 119:32 states, *"I run in the path of your command, for you have set my heart free"*. Please, come down with me a few verses later: *"I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts"* (119:45). Moving on to Proverbs 4:11-13, we can read: *"I guide you in the way of wisdom, and lead you along straight paths. When you walk, your steps will not be hampered; when you run, you will not stumble. Hold on to instruction, do not let it go; guard it well, for it is your life"*.

We, the children of God, took the same path: We were slaves to sin when God led us out of captivity and granted us a new birth. That's why we appreciate God's Law even in its most narrow meaning as a gift from God to His redeemed and born-again people. If there is someone out there who prefers living as he sees fit, he has to face the truth: He is a slave to his own desires and drives. He who lives according to the divine order of things, however, is the receiver of the freedom to live.

Make sure you understand: We are entirely clear about the fact that the Law can yield neither salvation nor spiritual life (cf. Romans 8:3). That is the very reason why God needs to bless us sinners with His grace first and awaken us by His Holy Spirit to new life. We might actually say that grace is older than the Law.

Turn to the book of Galatians with me where the Apostle Paul confirms what we just pointed out: *"The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God"* – that's the covenant of grace God made with Abraham – *"and thus do away with the promise"* (Galatians 3:17). In other words: God's love, His grace and mercy were there before the Law was given.

This observation makes the following ideas that some people put forward null and void: "People were just unable

to keep God's Law. It was too hard and burdensome for them. So God had to come up with a new plan on how He could save them nevertheless. Eventually, He invented the gospel." What a gross misunderstanding, people! How can you ever assume that God used to be a god of wrath and anger who was then forced to transform himself into some god of love?! God has always been a God of Love Who redeemed His people from slavery and oppression. He did that on an unconditional basis, and He granted them a new life in freedom.

Shaping the life that God gives us

After the Israelites had received a new life from God, He handed down His Commandments. They showed the people how to lay out and organize life so that they could fully enjoy it. If God, by an act of grace, gives you a new life, you then have the privilege to shape it under His guidance. You got the permission to live with God. And now God wants you to live a happy, fulfilling life, led by the Holy Spirit.

That's the reason why Proverbs 4:4 admonishes us to "*lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live*". Ezekiel talks about the ordinances of the Lord which are vital for us. They are a blessing God showers us with because they entail what makes life healthy and prosperous. So if you live according to the Commandments God gave us, you enjoy a fulfilling life.

This truth is expressed allover the Bible¹⁵; let us, for instance, go down to Romans 5:10 to see what Paul has to say in this context. "*The man who does these things will live by them.*" Without a doubt, Paul does not refer to eternal life here but to life on earth, blessed by God. Please, remember also that some of the Ten Commandments already announced the promise that we have if we follow the divine

¹⁵ cf. Leviticus 18:5; Deuteronomy 5:33; 6:2+24; 8:1; 30:16; Nehemiah 9:29; Proverbs 6:23, 7:2; 19:16; Acts 7:38b; Romans 7:10

order of life; the Fifth Commandment is a perfect example in this case: *“Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.”*

God’s motive and goal concerning the Commandments

So what was God’s motive for giving us the Commandments? Naturally, God wanted to reveal His righteousness and holiness in them. What’s more, His Law is supposed to be a boon for His children so that they can know how to live a blessed life according to His will. Thus, we can say: God’s main motive is love.

God loved His people. That’s why He handed them the Commandments. Scripture says: *“The LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth”*. What’s the understanding here? *“If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands that I give you today”* (Deuteronomy 28:1; cf. also 26:16-19; 4:8, 32-34; Psalm 147:19-20; Romans 3:1-2). God loves His chosen people, and He loves the ones He redeemed. Therefore, He gave us His Commandments. First John 5:3 backs this statement: *“This is love for God: to obey his commands”*. If the children of God live in His ways according to the will He disclosed to us – this is a reflection of God’s love.

What about the goal of the Commandments? Timothy answers this very question in his first book: *“The goal of this command is love which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith”* (1:5). Clearly, love was not only the motive but also the goal for the Commandments. Owing to this, we find Paul calling on us: *“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law”* (Romans 13:8).

Consequently, the Commandments and love can never take issue with one another. It is a contradiction in terms if someone says, “Don’t bug me with those Commandments. I follow the law of love.” Love is never ever a command that is directed against the other Commandments. We should rather like to say that the Ten Commandments specify how to implement the Law of love. What does it mean, if you are called to honor your father and your mother, not to lie, not to steal, not to covet your neighbor’s wife? In brief, it is nothing but a call to love. So love is the headline that summarizes all of the Commandments (cf. Romans 13:8-10).

It is within this context that Paul tells the Galatians: “*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace ... Against such things there is no law*” (5:22-23). Evidently, neither is love against the Law nor is the Law against love. The truth of the matter is that the Law is love. Real love that God gives us will always express itself in the framework of His commands.

This clearly spells out that it is not us who define what love is. God Himself provides us with this definition by handing us His Commandments. If we obey them and live accordingly, we are people who exercise love in a very practical way. Jesus has the very same thing in mind when He states: “*If you love me, you will obey what I command*” (John 14:15). Why? Because love and the commands are the same. They are identical. Love is at the heart of the Commandments, it gives them meaning and content. When you love, you actually take God’s Commandments seriously.

Bearing this in mind, let us now turn to Matthew: “*Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold*” (24:12). The less our society respects and keeps the Law, the more wicked, inconsiderate, violent and unloving man will become. What a stark contrast then, when a

people carry God's Law in their hearts: They begin loving both God and their fellow-men!

Even Christians often seem to forget what love really is. Frequently, it is nothing more than a good feeling. I remember somebody telling me once: "You can't order someone to love!" Correct. As long as it is merely a romantic mood, you can't. The moment, however, love is reflected in acts of love – acts that are indicative of God's Law – yes, I may very well order someone to love then. It is God Who says in His Commandments: "*You shall ...*" In John 13:34, we find the same idea, when Jesus lets us know, "*A new command I give you: Love one another.*"

Please, don't get me wrong. Surely, love is accompanied by emotions. This mustn't be confused with the nature of love, however. If feelings are all there is to it, it will not be enough. It does not correspond to God's will either. Scripture is very clear about this point: "*Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth*" (1 John 13:34). Love is obedience. Being obedient means doing God's will, as revealed to us in His Law.

Obviously, love that is active reflects the nature and keeping of the Law. God has good intentions for us and loves us so very much. This is the reason He did not abolish the Law. He established it. And what if we go wrong in employing God's Commandments? Then, we may take all our weakness to Jesus; the One Who shed His blood for our sins at the Cross of Calvary.

I'd like to close with a passage from Psalm 119: "*Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD. Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart. They do nothing wrong; they walk in his ways. You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed. Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees! Then I would not be put to shame when I consider all your commands*" (1-6).

The First Commandment: Thou shalt have no other gods before me¹⁶

“Thou shalt have no other gods before me”

(Exodus 20:3, KJV).

If you take a closer look at the Ten Commandments, you will note that God does not address the public in general but rather, you as an individual. It does not say “you in general shall not ...” instead the Bible refers to “thou”, i.e. the individual. Of course, we find the same personal appeal in the First Commandment also: *“Thou shalt have no other gods before me”*.

The word *“before”* indicates that this commandment applies to people who already know their God. A different translation might even render *“Thou shalt have no other gods before my face”*¹⁷. We all know that God handed His people the Commandments only after He had led them out of captivity in Egypt. So the Israelites had already had a wonderful opportunity to get to know God.

Almighty God gave His chosen people this instruction to ensure that they worship Him exclusively. God would not allow them to honor other gods in His stead, neither other gods before or apart from Him.

The children of Israel faced a very real risk here at that time. This hasn't changed for us Christians either. As born-again children of God, we don't want to trade our Lord Jesus Christ for an idol. Nevertheless, we also are confronted with the fact that more often than not, our hearts do not give Him our undivided attention.

¹⁶ Sermon delivered on August 30, 1998

¹⁷ The same Hebrew expression appears both in Isaiah 65:3 and Jeremiah 6:7; these contexts are all very similar as far as their content is concerned.

Why no other gods?

Once somebody said to me: “If your God can’t stand any competition, He’s got to be a fairly jealous, super-sensitive, envious chap!” Really? Is that the true motivation that God has when He gives us this statute in the First Commandment? At first sight, it seems as if the person who made this statement is right. Scripture itself says both in the following Commandment and in other passages throughout the Bible that God is a jealous God. Taking a closer look at the entire Word of God, we can gain a more accurate understanding. God is neither super-sensitive nor so selfish that He simply couldn’t tolerate anybody next to Him.

His motivation for setting up a Commandment like this stems from His truthfulness. The sole truth of the matter is that there is only one God. It is a fact that there is no other god before or apart from Him. Unless you acknowledge this truth, you will erect a second god and start serving a lie. Since God is truth, He is obliged to forbid what doesn’t represent a fact.

Man made himself other gods, nevertheless. This is a figment of his own imagination and evidence of his fallen nature. God’s view is objective; He can see that there is no other God than He Himself. Please, have a look at Isaiah 45:5: “*I am the LORD, and there is no other.*” God cannot tolerate any other gods because such action would run counter to the truth. Instead, He leaves us no alternative but to recognize and adore Him – something that is due to Him.

If there is but one God, the consequences for us are obvious: We are to live in His presence. He is our Creator and Savior. We are accountable to Him alone. Isn’t that what God demanded when He said to Abraham: “*Walk before me and be blameless*” (Genesis 17:1).

Picture your being alone on this planet. Nobody could see what you were doing and how you behaved. Nobody –

but God. It goes without saying that such an idea carries little sense of reality in it. And yet, there is a grain of truth in it: Even though there are billions of people around us, we live in such a way as if there was no-one but God. Remember that we are not primarily accountable to man for our actions but to our Lord. And as He sees us in our existence, the visual life that we lead in the presence of others doesn't count as much as the life we lead before Him. It is because of this that it would be far-fetched and not acceptable to God to allow other gods before Him.

“Other gods” can find expression in many things

Indeed, a number of things can express the idea of “other gods”. Just think of money or property, for instance. Other examples cross my mind, such as someone's spouse, their friends, people they idolize, music, art, hobbies, work, even the “me, myself and I – god”. If your heart is so very much attached to these gods, some serious consequences may very well follow. Do you worry a lot? Does such dismay even give you a hard time falling asleep in the night? I wouldn't be surprised if it were to do with the First Commandment. You might cling to people and stuff as if that was your god. You are anxiety-ridden and fear the loss of your children, your money, your honor, your husband or your health as if you had to face losing the Living God. All of these examples are indications of idol worship.

Please, let me try to drive my point home to you by giving you an example. A Christian used to live in a serene area and certainly enjoyed his life in the country. Then, he got wind of a project in which a highway was to be cast right behind his beautiful yard, which was more of a park really. This news put him in a state of shock. The first thing he thought of was how much his property would be depreciated in the course of time. And what about all that noise that he would have to put up with? It didn't matter one bit

that the project would not be finished for the next five years or so. Thoughts like these tormented the man a great deal until God showed him the real reason for his concern and disquiet. He couldn't let go of his property and had an unhealthy attachment towards it. Let me ask you now: Would it really be so bad if the gentleman had to lose everything? How does a Christian react when faced with a loss?

In the book of Job, we find an answer. *"The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised"* (1:21). The question that underlies my example is this: What is your life based on really? Is it based on God only? Or is it based on a number of other things that you try to keep with all your might? When we encounter situations where we have to part with those things, that's when sleepless nights and panic settle in.

Abraham as a role model

In this context, Abraham has become a major role model for me. Please, recall the moment after he had rescued his nephew Lot from captivity. The king of Sodom offered him to keep the goods that Abraham had conquered during the battle. It would have been his booty. How did Abraham respond? *"I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the tong of a sandal"* (Genesis 14:22-23).

God must have rejoiced over Abraham's conduct. The reason why I am sure of this is to be found in the fact that God encourages Abraham just a little later: *"Do not be afraid ... I am your shield, your very great reward"* (15:1). So God says that He Himself wants to be the reward that Abraham will receive.

That reminds me of a biography I perused some time ago. It was about Charles Studd, a popular missionary, who used to be a renowned top cricket player in his youth and

even heir to a big fortune. One day, he felt God's calling to proclaim the gospel full-time. He obeyed. Eventually, he also got married to a young lady from the Salvation Army. At their wedding, her dress carried some embroidery that resembled a sash almost; on it, it said: "United to be in battle for Jesus". The couple first went on a mission assignment in China, later in Africa. Guess what Charles Studd did before they reported for service? He gave away his inheritance!

Please, let there be no misunderstanding: Obeying the First Commandment does not necessarily imply giving away your possessions. Such teaching cannot be found in the Bible; Charles Studd did not preach that either. At the core of the matter, we find an issue that touches our inner relationship towards money and our personal possessions. It is in this respect that Charles Studd, our brother-in-Christ, can serve but as an example for us.

Charles Studd exemplified that even disposing of such great wealth did not turn out to be a real loss. As Christians, we should be able to lose everything as long as we are in God. It is only if we were to lose Him that we would suffer a true, immeasurable loss. As long as we still have Him, we haven't lost anything at all.

Why don't we see how this truth is expressed in Scripture itself? "*Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and portion for ever*" (Psalm 73:25-26). Asaph, who wrote this psalm, did not have any other god before the Lord. And what about you personally? If you, dear reader, are happy with what and who God is to you and your heart clings to Him alone, it doesn't matter anymore to you if you have or don't have things. These issues are completely insignificant to you.

Look at Abraham, if you will. Once again, we can observe something outstanding about him: Difficult situations

did not blow him away. Check out the following situation in his life that illustrates this point. Both Abraham's and his nephew Lot's cattle had grown considerably in size. Due to this, the land could no longer support the herds and flocks of both men. More and more, their herdsmen grew angry at each other and fought over the land. Ultimately, Abraham suggested the following to his nephew: *"If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left"* (Genesis 13:9). Abraham's heart was not turned towards material things. He was not greedy but left it up to God to determine which part of the inheritance would be his.

We know for a fact that Abraham was even willing to sacrifice Isaac when God had asked him for it. Isaac – Abraham's own beloved son that God had promised him. He did not fear for his child nor did he entertain any nagging thoughts as to what would become of Isaac. I don't mean to imply here that you are supposed to be neglectful or ignorant about your family. We definitely do have a responsibility for our dependants and loved ones. We are also obliged to lovingly attend to the people God placed in our care. When faced with the loss of somebody we love, people who live according to the First Commandment will have the strength to go through these times victoriously. Even in those moments we will find our share in God, the One Who is our one and only true Happiness.

This is what Paul has to say in this regard: *"The time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away. I would like you to be free from concern"* (1 Corinthians 7:29-32).

If your heart is geared towards God and Christ is your sole Anchor, so that you don't depend on anything and anybody in this world but the Living Lord alone – what a blessing the First Commandment will be for you then! How free and liberated you can live! No longer do you have to rely on wealth or health. As a child of God, your heart will be in tune with the First Commandment. That's why even if the one person you love the most were to pass away, you may face the future much more relaxed.

Without a doubt, I often stated something like the following also: "I couldn't imagine life without my wife." The more, however, I pondered the First Commandment, the more was I compelled to reconsider. I love my wife, and she loves me. And yet, if it was true that we could not live without a particular person, that very person would be our god. A god before the true God. There is only one single scenario that would make it impossible for us to live: The one where God is no more in our hearts.

So the children of God have the privilege of enjoying a completely independent life, due to the fact that they honor the First Commandment. They grow into strong personalities that are not subject to worries and anxieties. For what becomes of you once you lose something or perhaps your all? A frequently-stated quote from missionary Jim Elliot comes to mind: "He is no fool, who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose". Needless to say that he referred to the Living God Who revealed Himself to us in Jesus Christ.

It is my prayer and my heart-felt desire that my message especially takes root in the hearts of the fearful, anxious ones and also in the hearts of people who are going through hardship and ordeals and are consequently worrying a lot presently. Don't get caught up in the things of this world! Just let go of them and lay it all down at the feet of the Living God to Whom you can entrust yourself and all your life.

Sad to say that there are brothers and sisters-in-Christ who tremendously struggle whenever their honor is at stake. For them, their honor became their god. I tried to point this out to a brother once when I counseled him. It was clear to me that he had a hard time forgiving others; in fact, bitterness had already taken root in his heart. Can you imagine what he answered me? “There are lots of things, brother Wegert that I am willing to put up with. But one thing I won’t allow is if somebody wants to trash me, making slanderous, defamatory remarks about me.” I asked this brother to examine his heart; did he feel equally passionate about God’s honor? Let us move from this gentleman to you, dear reader. What about you? Do you hold your own person in the highest regard also? Do you forbid anybody to dishonor you, no matter the cost? Perhaps this is the very reason why you can’t forgive. May I draw your attention to the fact that it is a lot better to suffer injustice than to be unjust?! In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches: *“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you”* (Matthew: 5:11-12). You can only do what Jesus wants you to do if you don’t pursue happiness for your own sake. Instead, find happiness in adoring and honoring God.

Apparently, we don’t need to allow an insult to lead us into a life of hard feelings and bitterness; nor do we need to simply take offense. All the more can we rejoice in having our Lord Jesus. If you obey the First Commandment, you are able to let go and enjoy peace of mind, regardless of how other people act. The happiest of all is the one who finds his all in God. May our Faithful Lord give you just that, by sending His Holy Spirit. Then you can leave all your troubles and worries behind and experience true joy and deep peace. In Jesus’ name I pray.

The Second Commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any ... image¹⁸

“Thou shalt not make unto thee any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them; for I, the LORD, thy God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.”
(Exodus 20:4-6, KJV)

The Second Commandment is the only one that carries with it a threat along with a promise. We will deal with this aspect in our next chapter. The question that takes our attention first of all is what God actually means when He forbids us to make any images which represent God. What do we understand by the term “serving them”? Does this imply that a person crawls on his or her knees in a submissive act in front of something like a death stake? Could one take to mean the worship of idols in a Hindu temple or the dancing of priests around an altar as they worship Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18)?

The First Commandment says, *“You shall have no other gods before me.”* This Commandment unconditionally forbids any other foreign gods, and automatically includes the making of any images of such gods. Because of this reason one can indeed assume that when we look at the Second Commandment, it isn’t talking about foreign gods. One is commanded not to have them anyway. No, it is dealing with the issue of how the true God should be worshipped.

¹⁸ Sermon preached on September 06, 1998

The use of images during worship is also idol worship

If we look exactly at this law, we will conclude then, that the worshiping of idols does not only mean the honoring of false gods. It also means the worship of the true God with the aid of images. This means then, that when we use visual portrayals of the Triune God in worship, it is idol worship. So in the Second Commandment, it isn't only about which God we should serve, but also the way in which we should do it.

In the first Commandment God presents Himself as the one and only God, there is no other God. In the Second Commandment He clearly wants us to understand Who He is and what form of worship is pleasing in His sight.

The reason for this comprehensive Commandment

What is the reason for this comprehensive Commandment? One could think it could really be helpful to have a visual depiction of God during worship. Once when I brought up the topic of an icon and the crucifix to someone that was on a sort of altar in his room, the person responded, "You see, it helps me concentrate on God. This way, I can worship Him much better!" I could feel that this man meant it all in a good way, and also that he earnestly wanted to seek and worship God. Nevertheless, God announces severe punishment when a person seeks to worship Him with the aid of representations of His person. No other law carries quite the same threat of judgment as this law, not even the law that states "*Thou shalt not kill.*"

Because this Commandment doesn't carry a clear idea of what is meant, some oftentimes think that it only forbids pictures of God that distort Him. Others reason that what it forbids could be such images as we find in other pagan religions. But for God, this isn't what it is all about. His Word states, "*Thou shalt **not** make unto thee **any** carved image,*

or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath ...” (KJV). So we see that we shouldn't use any representation of God, whether in the likeness of anything in the heavens, nor images of Him in the form of animals or mankind. We should not use images of Christ, either, in our worship of Him.

Why does mankind possess the tendency to include the use of objects while they worship? We can see the reason in the fact that mankind is flesh, while God is a Spirit. Jesus has admonished us to worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). However, carnal human beings have always got a desire to communicate with a representation that is also carnal.

God, on the other hand, isn't One Whom we can worship carnally. He has a body that is not visible nor has He got one which He uses to speak to us. One can only be aware of Him through the Holy Spirit. This way, no one can really come to Him by means of their own human competence. He exists within a totally different realm. Because God is a Spirit, those that exist in the form of flesh and blood cannot live in communion with Him.

This means, if we want to worship God, we must have His Spirit in our hearts. No true worship of Him can occur by any other means. Carnal mankind however, wants to visually see who they approach in worship. Their nature is stamped with the desire to make unto themselves portraits and images because they have five senses which they use to be aware of things. That's why we encounter church services in which they use bells that they can hear or burning incense that they can smell. God however, basically says that, “when you begin to use representations of me in the form of images in your worship, you immediately worship a false god”, because God is a Spirit and it is impossible to come into His Presence by means of material representations.

It's about God's honor

However, it is difficult to understand why God would threaten to bring about such hard punishment if someone violates this law. Isn't He putting stress on petty matters? I don't think so because I presume observing this law is of crucial importance. It's about the honor of God, you see. Images cause God's honor to be detracted, because they cast a shadow on His glory. They have their origins ensuing from a carnal world and, therefore, could never represent God. How should the created creature depict the Creator that was never created? John Calvin once said something to this effect, "A true representation of God cannot be found in the whole world."¹⁹ Whoever believes, he or she has found a fitting depiction of God, ascribes carnality to Him, and therefore ascribes mortality to Him. Even the most glorious representation would belittle His majestic state and thus mar His honor. Every image brings the unchangeable, eternal, uncreated God in par with the created, mortal, and carnal. God however is an eternal Spirit. So every image would be a lie because it could never measure up to the eternal and almighty God. To top it all, such representations convey, inevitably, the wrong idea of who God is. This causes God's true state to be exchanged with that of a human state.

... and about His divine nature

What kind of a sin is it, when we erect images and cause people to be deceived about the true nature of God? Portraits and statues don't only relay the erroneous idea that God has a visible body with hands and feet. They also unavoidably conceal the truth about His true nature and His divine character. Someone said to me, "Images do not lead

¹⁹ Quoted after: James I. Packer (in German): Gott kennen. Verlag der Liebenzeller Mission: Lahr, 1994⁴. Page 41

one to believe in the true God. They lead to unbelief because they cause you to believe in a false God.”

This is what happened also in the case of Aaron. He caused himself to be prodded, by the people, into erecting a statue of a calf. This statue was made to be a visual symbol of Yahweh, the almighty God. The children of Israel didn't originally have the intention of paying tribute to a false god. They only wanted to worship a god they could see, because they had waited so long for Moses to come down from Mount Sinai and God had not yet revealed Himself to them. So Aaron went ahead and allowed golden earrings and other pieces of jewelry to be melted down and formed into a calf. Israel used this symbol to represent the might and strength of their Lord and they certainly meant to honor God as we can read in Exodus 32:5, *“When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, ‘Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD.’”* This calf could certainly well have represented the might and strength of a powerful god. However, what it couldn't have represented was His holiness, righteousness, mercy, patience and love. So we see that this image could be used to mirror only an infinitesimal part of the nature of God. In this way the image became only an inadequate caricature.

In quite a similar way, a crucifix only shrouds the glory of God, because it conceals the knowledge of the divine nature of Christ. We indeed see His suffering when we see the crucifix but we certainly don't see the resurrection of our Lord. I have heard of people who have knelt down in front of crucifixes and meditated so much on the suffering of Christ that they have said they felt His own pain. They have taken this to mean they have been divinely blessed. They see more of a suffering Christ on the cross, but not the resurrected Lord. This leads to a one-sided view and therefore to a wrong view of God. This is the reason why the Second

Commandment forbids the use of images of Him during our worship.

Now, some shocked Christians will ask themselves, “Does this mean we shouldn’t use any images of Jesus in Sunday school? What about paintings and sculptures, and art, in general, which are used in churches?” I want to say this to put your mind at rest: In my opinion, the thing that makes the difference is that the law forbids the use of such images **for worship**. When we tell Bible stories in our Sunday school programs and choose to use material to visually explain such stories, we’re not asking, that holiness be ascribed to such objects. We wouldn’t expect you fall before them and worship them. I have great misgivings though when I see worship services in which crucifixes are carried around, when these and other objects are deemed holy, and used as objects that people show honor to.

False impressions of God

It isn’t always only pictures and material objects that are being referred to when God says we shouldn’t use anything to portray Who He is. It can go beyond that to include false imaginations that we have in our minds. It is sometimes taught that God can do nothing without our so-called good efforts. As a result, in this sense, no revival or healing could take place. If we conceive God that way, the result is that we come up with a god that is powerless without us. The Bible teaches that God is sovereign, independent, all powerful and exalted. It teaches also that we can do nothing without Him (cf. e.g., John 15:5). It doesn’t say that He can do nothing without us.

Another person described his inner picture of God in this way: “I don’t see God as being judge as such, instead I see Him more as being Father.” Often you’ll hear these brothers and sisters-in-Christ say something like this, when they

want to pray: “I have a date with my Daddy.” Suddenly it sounds as if “we are God’s partners.”

Will there ever be a time when God and His Creation will be on the same level? No, never. We are, and will always be His children. Admittedly, I also said to my son when he was small, “Christian, you’re my friend.” Look, if we imply that we are God’s partners, the emphasis is seen as being more of a business relationship, making us seem as being partakers of His powers. This unbiblical understanding can only lead us to applying humanness to God, and thus lead us to respond to this “god” as we would do with a person.

Not too long ago during a meeting with some pastors, I said, “The natural man isn’t able to believe.” The response of one person was, “Then God would be demanding something that no human being could fulfill. I don’t believe in such a God.” I had to explain to him that if this is the case, then he doesn’t believe in the God of the Bible. The reason why we are lost is that God has demands of us that we cannot meet. That is the curse under which we are. That’s why Jesus had to come and die for us, so that we could gain a righteousness that we ourselves could not bring about. So God isn’t a god who just overlooks all we do. He is a God that demands righteousness.

With this example, we can see how swiftly a carnal understanding of God can result. One can worship a living God and nevertheless, have an impression in his mind that doesn’t match the revelation of the true nature of God.

The true source for knowing Who God is, is the Holy Scriptures

Whoever wants to have and keep a true concept of God needs to be continually occupied with the Word of God. This needs to be a life-long endeavor, because we could

succumb to the danger of wandering off track due to our own imaginations and thoughts.

So the Second Commandment teaches that the eternal God is above all things in the world. Much higher than we human beings could ever imagine. That's why we need to humble ourselves and listen to Him just as He is. It isn't pictures that should impress our imaginations – it should be the Word of God. The people, who use pictures to aid in their worship of God, whether it is inward pictures or external impressions, just haven't learnt to really love God and to seek Him in His Word. Whoever harbors little favorite imaginations of God seldom has a really serious interest in the Bible. The Bible shatters all carnal imagery of Him. That's why I'm asking you; read the Bible daily and extensively. In this way you'll be prevented from forming any false imaginings about God. Instead, you'll hold steadfast to what He says He is all about. The following, very meaningful, verses of Scripture are what Moses gave to the children of Israel, *“Then the LORD spoke to you ... you heard the sound of words but saw no form ... You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire ... Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman or like any animal ...”* (Deuteronomy 4:12-17). God didn't show the children of Israel any visual symbol. He gave them only His Word. His Word is what we should be obedient to and we should remain therein. The only image of Himself that He has given to us is Jesus, the Son of God (2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15).

The Second Commandment: The sins of the fathers and the grace towards thousands²⁰

“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.”
(Exodus 20:4-7)

I read an article in our local newspaper called the “Hamburger Abendblatt”. It was written by an evangelical pastor, and it read, “The law of the society we live in today says: Honest people are stupid people.” We know what he meant when he said that. He meant that these days people think those who lie, steal, cheat, forge, deceive, perform unfaithfully etc., to get ahead in life, are the clever ones. What’s more, some people reason that blessings happen when the laws are broken, when people free themselves up and set up laws of their own. One example would be that the honest ones are the stupid ones.

In Ezekiel 33:15, and altogether in the Bible, we read that the Commandments of God are an order by which all men should live. Someone formulated it this way: “The Commandments form the framework by which life prospers. Everything that takes place outside these boundaries works destructively against us.” That means when I live according to the laws of God, I have a promise that His blessings will follow me. If I don’t, I will degenerate and die.

²⁰ Sermon preached on September 13, 1998

In Deuteronomy 30:15-16, we read the well-known account about blessing and curse. There we read, *“See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.”* He promised to send a curse, as can be seen in verse 19, *“This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.”*

To clear away any misunderstandings, this is what it states: The law doesn't promise eternal life, but a life full of blessings during the time we're on earth. So in this sense we can really agree with Leviticus 18:5 when it says *“Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them.”*

God's punishment extends up to the forth generation

When we say that the Commandments of God remain valid to the present days that includes the blessings and curses that happen when we choose to obey or disobey them. We actually find many examples in the Word of God where the fathers sinned and their sons and ensuing generations were punished for those sins. In Lamentations 5:7, the prophet had this to say, *“Our fathers sinned and are no more, and we bear their punishment.”* In this verse we see that the family is seen as a unit from God's perspective.

I want to make this clearer by using three Biblical examples. The sins of Adam were passed on to all the following generations. Paul writes in Romans 5:18, *“Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.”* So, because of the sin

of the first human being, death came upon the whole world. This affects all humanity without exception.

In Genesis 15:14, God told Abraham, that his ancestors would only occupy the Promised Land after four hundred years. These four hundred years would be spent in captivity in a foreign land. The reason for this can be found in Genesis 15:16, *“In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure”*. It was to be after this that the Canaanites were to be judged. So, God had set in place a time of judgment for the Canaanites, during the time of Joshua, that their ancestors had caused four hundred years before that.

Jesus had this to say about the topic when He faced the Pharisees and told them about the coming destruction of Jerusalem, *“So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill, then the measure of the sin of your forefathers! You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barakiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation”* (Matthew 23:31-36). So we see that Jesus was also convinced that the descendants would also be judged for the sins of their forefathers.

Moreover, the Jews were certainly not unaware of the fact that God punished the children for the sins of their fathers and forefathers. We could see this clearly as they said to Pilate when he offered to set Jesus free, *“Let his blood be on us and on our children!”* (Matthew 27:25). The question

that hits home closely is this. Look at the holocaust in Nazi Germany and the persecution of the children of Israel that they have seen for hundreds of years; could those events possibly have anything to do with the statement they made in the above-mentioned verse as they demanded the crucifixion of Jesus? I don't think so. Even if it were that way, woe be unto those who have persecuted the people of Israel!

There have also been situations in my life when I've had to suffer for the faults of others. I can especially remember one very well. I do, because that was the time I heard the word "war" for the first time. My mother and I were taking a ride in the tram through the streets of Hamburg in Germany. Destruction due to bombing was all around, and I said, "Mama, why are there so many stones around here?" I referred to the piles of rubble and stones that could be seen everywhere around us. My mother's answer was, "Yes Wolfgang, there was war in Germany." I will never forget that. Every time my mother ran out of bread during the second half of the week and we were hungry, being so young, I asked her why we were so poor. The answer, as always, was, "There was war." At the time I was very angry with God that I had nothing to eat because those people, most of whom had long died already, had led us into war. I was innocent of any such happenings and was now suffering for the sins of others.

In just the same way, the fathers imprint the children in families that disregard God. We're familiar with the saying, "the chip never falls far from the block." This is just what the Second Commandment is implying. If we don't honor God and serve Him alone, but decline into serving idols, and disregard God's laws, it will have a negative effect on the family. The sins of the fathers will have repercussions up to the fourth generation. So it goes from father to son, to grand-children and great grand-children.

Children carry the sins of their fathers only if they themselves continue to sin in the same way

We've heard that a curse has come upon humanity due to the sins of one person. Paul formulates it in Romans 5:12 (KJV), in this way. *"Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men,"* and now a second and very important reason follows, *"for all have sinned."* So we see it is both: The sins of the fathers and one's own sin. That's why the Second Commandment states that the punishment for the sins of the fathers will continue to come upon the children, even in the third and fourth generations, *"of those who hate me"*.

However, when the sons repent, the curse is lifted. In Ezekiel 18:20, we read *"The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him."* In verse 21 we read, *"But if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die"*. If anyone has repented, that person does not belong to the group of people who hate God and His laws. A born-again person has, instead, received the gift of righteousness in Christ. Because of his repentance, he has been set free from the sins of his fathers, grandfathers, or other ancestors.

I want to point this out so clearly, because many people suffer on account of this. They have been taught about the threat of a curse upon their lives, found in the Second Commandment. They have been taught too, that they indeed can suffer because of the sins of their ancestors even though they are believers in Christ. Because of this misunderstanding they can even be hindered in their spiritual growth. That however isn't the truth found in the Bible. When a person repents, by the grace of God, every curse is

immediately lifted from him and he is placed under the promise of blessings that is presented to thousands of generations.

Do not allow yourselves to be intimidated anymore, dear child of God. You belong to Jesus, love His laws and you have received grace to turn from sin and to follow Him. This verse becomes valid for you: *“The soul who sins shall surely die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, not will the father share the guilt of the son.”* Please keep this in your hearts.

Grace for thousands

Someone once said to me, “The gift of grace isn’t included in the Ten Commandments at all.” At first I agreed, but as I thought about it, **this blessed line** came to my attention. It **states**, *“but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.”* It hadn’t occurred to anyone that, “When I keep His Commandments and I am in them a hundred per cent, my life will have an effect on thousands of my successors to come.” So we see that it isn’t those who perfectly keep the Commandments, who will receive that line of blessing in their lives. Instead it will be those who live under the dispensation of grace. The gospel is very clear concerning the Law of God is this way.

It isn’t every successor of Abraham that lives under this blessing, but all believers. They are the ones who live under grace. These are Christians who love God and keep His Commandments. We know that one cannot be separated from the other. People who belong to Jesus love the Commandments and keep them too. This is done through the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within them. *“If you love me, you will obey my command.” (John 14:15)*. The “thousands of generations”, we read about, refers to the spiritual seed of all believers, everywhere in the world and

throughout all ages. We read in Revelations 14:12, *“This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.”* This is already expounded very clearly to us in Revelations 12:17, where it says, *“Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring – those who **obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.**”*

When people walk in the Law of God that leads to great blessings, this becomes evident also in their every-day lives. The Bible explains in the New as well as the Old Testament, and especially in Revelations, that the nations that despise His laws live under a curse. In connection with this, I find it very interesting that the nations that received the Gospel first are still nations that are ahead, both politically and economically. This was the gospel brought by the Reformers to the nations in Europe and North America primarily.

In Deuteronomy 28:13 for example, it says, *“The LORD will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commandments of the LORD your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom.* In Deuteronomy 15:6 it says, *“For the LORD your God will bless you as he has promised, and **you** will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations but none will rule over **you.**”*

The Law of God is like a rule of thumb. Wherever you find people who honor God, treasure His laws and use them as fundamental guide-lines, blessings follow. This rule doesn’t only apply to nations, it applies also to families. Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 1:5, *“I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.”* In Chapter 3, verses 14-15 we read, *“But*

as for you, continue in what you have learned ..., because you know those from whom you have learned it and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures ...” Of course, even such a young man must turn from sin, but nevertheless it is a great blessing to have been brought up in a family that believes.

Maybe you’re asking the question, “Why am I doing so badly? After all I have given my life to Jesus; I love and follow His laws!” This is my answer to you. If you don’t experience blessings materially and in things externally, it wouldn’t mean that you won’t live a full and happy life. Let me use the example of Job to explain things a bit clearer.

The Bible says of Job, that he lived according to the Law of God, and was upright as no other could be. The result indeed, was that he had wealth, health and many children to show for it. However, he lost everything materially, got ill and his children died. What did he do wrong? Was the line of blessings in his family broken?

When you take Job’s life and scrutinize it in its entirety, you must admit that great blessings followed him. Nevertheless, there were times in his life when he had to learn a thing or two, and that was about trusting God more, persevering and being more patient. He needed to learn to honor God despite awkward situations. Such “times of testing” are usually not pleasant. Nevertheless we know that God never allows us to carry a greater burden than we can bear. He sees us through.

When we have left the dark valley behind, we discover that we have emerged being more mature. We find we can live a happy life whether we are rich or poor, in good or in bad times. So our lives aren’t under a curse when we live through such times. Grace manifests itself, in that Jesus trains us and works perfection in us towards eternal life. May God bless you in this.

The Third Commandment: Do not misuse the Name of the Lord your God I²¹

“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”
(Exodus 20:7)

In the First Commandment we read, *“You shall have no other gods before me.”* We’ve been told then, what we should focus on in our worship. In the Second Commandment we receive instructions as to how to worship this one true God. That is without the use of images and other material means which we could use to portray who He is. The fact is that there is nothing in this world He created that would be sufficient in depicting Who this living God is, Who is a Spirit.

The Third Commandment deals with the condition of our hearts when we worship Him. When we use the name of God, we should do so earnestly, with honor and with dignity. In Deuteronomy 28:58 we read that God has a glorious and awesome name that we should revere.

In other words, our heavenly Father wants the majesty of His name to remain purely holy. What’s more, He wants His name to be sacred in our speech, in our thoughts, as well as in all that we do. So we should only use God’s name with utmost caution and never mechanically or thoughtlessly.

Thoughtless misuse

In the NIV translation of the Bible we read, *“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God.”* The KJV ver-

²¹ Sermon, delivered on September 27, 1998

sion puts it this way, *“Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain.”*

For one, that concerns our personal prayers. When we pray to our God, this should reverently take place, consciously, in His presence. Our prayers should always be with our whole heart, soul and emotions. In brief, it should be done with all that we are and have. When we pray, we should literally lay it all on the altar for the honor of the name of God, who has set us free through Jesus.

When we pray, openly, with the family it should not take place in a hectic and superficial way. I believe that hurried “instant-prayers”, so-to-speak, do not meet the standard set in the Third Commandment. Please, look at this little story as an illustration. A mother who had worked hard the whole day, and was now about to tuck her child in for the night, wanted to say a prayer for him as is the normal custom in a Christian family. So she hurriedly prayed, “God is gracious, God is good and we thank Him for our food”, when her little son said, “But Mama, I’m going to bed now!” She corrected herself and hurriedly said the “right” bed-time prayer which sounded something like this: “Gentle Jesus meek and mild look upon a little child, pity my simplicity, suffer me to come to thee”. Nevertheless, I believe that quick and thoughtless prayers as “Uhm, God, just bless us too”, do not honor God.

Apart from that, our personal and familiar behavior toward God, says a lot about how we treat others within our own church congregation. Are you often late for church? Think for a moment about why you aren’t punctual for church on Sundays, while on the other hand you never miss a minute during the week in the presence of your boss. Looking at it, you’ll realize that it is actually a wonderful thing to come before the Lord together with your brothers and sisters!

Consider this too. When we sing together, we express the name of the Lord in diverse ways. Is it right, then, when you're constantly whispering with your neighbor? Maybe you mechanically sing a chorus but your thoughts are somewhere else. Aren't you taking the name of the Lord in vain?

The same applies for constant comments and remarks made during the sermon or during other contributions. Please reflect on this for a moment: You do not come to church or the service to assess it. Instead, you're there to worship the Lord and to receive from Him whatever blessings He has for you. When you concentrate on the Lord, and your heart is centered on Him, you'll retain enough to be able to tell your partner, your children or your friends about what was most important to you and what the Lord had to say to you.

And so, I want to appeal to you, give God the honor in your personal life as well as during the times you spend with your family or church family. Give Him the honor that's due to Him in that you turn to Him with your whole heart in prayer. Concentrate fully on Him during the delivery of His Word so you can hear what He has to say to you. That's when you'll experience what blessing the Lord has for those who regard the Third Commandment.

Misuse because of disobedience

People can abuse the name of the Lord in that they honor Him with their mouths, while they live disobediently in their practical lives. In Isaiah 48:1, we read: *"Listen to this, O house of Jacob, you who are called by the name of Israel and come from the line of Judah, you who take oaths in the name of the LORD and invoke the God of Israel – but not in truth or righteousness – ..."*

So we see that the Israelites called on the name of the Lord, but they weren't obedient to the One whose name

they called on. Jesus rebuked them when He said, “*Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord’, and do not do what I say?*” (Luke 6:46). In Matthew 7:22-23, He warned them when He said, “*Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’*” And in Matthew 15:8, we read, “*These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.*”

We can notice among Christians also, that there is a strong surge in the usage of the Lord’s name. Do you know such phrases as, “In the name of Jesus ...” or “this is what the Lord says ...” I don’t believe that the Commandment means that we shouldn’t do anything more in the name of the Lord. However, when the Lord, in Whose name we witness, hasn’t authorized us to do so, then such behavior is more than questionable. The words, “The Lord says”, appear many times in the Bible, in fact 430 times²². But woe to those who say He has spoken, when He has not.

In Ezekiel 13:2-3 God says to the prophet, “*Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are now prophesying. Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: ‘Hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing!’*” So God seriously warns us that we should search our hearts and not quickly and superficially say He has said things when these things originated out of our own minds and with the wrong motives. So let us not only revere the name of the Lord when we speak, let us also be obedient in our daily walk

²² The Old Testament records the phrase “*This is what the LORD says*” some 293 times; the passage “*This is the word of the Lord*” appears some 136 times. We only find “*This is what God says*” once. The New Testament does not use this particular phrase.

and live, practically, what we proclaim with our mouths. In other words, let us walk the walk and talk the talk!

Misuse when taking oaths

Examples of misuse of God's name when people take oaths might not happen every day, but it is nevertheless important. When a person takes an oath officially, the name of God is often used. However, whenever the name of God is used and the truth isn't spoken, the Bible declares this to be a grievous sin.

Of course the question is posed: Should Christians swear at all? They are called upon to do so often enough. Some examples would be when an oath is taken during the swearing in of a government officer, a soldier or a political ministry official. When a person appears in a court of law as a witness, that court can demand that an oath is taken to lend credibility to that person's statement.

The Bible acknowledges the use of God's name in both the Old and New Testaments, and rates this in a positive light. We read in Isaiah 65:16, "*Whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the God of truth; he who takes an oath in the land will swear by the God of truth.*" In Jeremiah 12:16 it says, "*And if they learn well the ways of my people and swear by my name, saying, 'As surely as the LORD lives' ...*" This expression is also an oath. We also read in Zechariah 8:17, "*... do not plot evil against your neighbor, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this*", declares the LORD."

What we can conclude is that God doesn't hate the oath itself; instead He hates the oath that is taken with the wrong motives. The fact is that an oath is God's appeal to the witness. Because of this the irrevocable truth of the statements we make are supported. This is also what the Apostle Paul did time and time again. When a person calls on God, Who is truth in its essence, to be a witness, that person swears in

the name of the One with Whom all grievances can be done away with.

However, when we take such an oath and do not tell the truth, or if we swear in the name of other gods, the wrath of God is enflamed. We see such a case for example in Jeremiah 5:7. It says, *“Why should I forgive you? Your children have forsaken me and sworn by gods that are not gods.”* We also read in Zephaniah 1:4-5, *“I will cut off from this place ... those who bow down and swear by the LORD and who also swear by Molech.”* So if we swear, we should do so only in God’s name (Deuteronomy 6:13; 10:20), simply because He alone is truth.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks about the fact that one shouldn’t swear at all. However when we take this and compare it, we will conclude that Jesus refers to a type of swearing that is thoughtless or careless. The fact was that the Pharisees and the Scribes had adopted the attitude of swearing about everything possible. They were swearing, for instance, by heaven and earth, by Jerusalem or even by their own heads (Matthew 5:33-37; cf. also 23, 16-22). They thought it a clever thing not to swear by God’s name so as to be on the safe side. However Jesus rebuked them for this and said that they should rather not swear at all. Instead they should let their yes be yes, and their no be no.

James 5:12 backs up this statement made by Jesus which still applies for us today. We too, shouldn’t swear hastily; in this regard, examples such as “So help me God”, “God stands between us”, or “as God is my witness”, are all misuse of the name of God.

Swearing the right way

When someone is in a predicament, and stands trial because he or she has been accused falsely, an oath is by all means required. This requirement would also be appropriate in the case of someone who is being slandered, and his

neighbor knows the truth but doesn't come forward so he can be acquitted. These examples would exactly fit the requirements God has for taking an oath. In these cases you may call on God as a witness before a court of law. In this way, everyone will be reassured that what you have said is the truth and can be believed.

In Exodus 22:10-11, we find a practical example for this: *“If a man gives a donkey, an ox, a sheep or any other animal to his neighbor for safekeeping and it dies or is injured or is taken away while no-one is looking, the issue between them will be settled by the taking of an oath before the LORD that the neighbor did not lay hands on the other person's property. The owner is to accept this, and no restitution is required.”* So the Bible has the answer when it comes to swearing an oath so that the truth may come to light.

In other parts of the Bible, we also find practical formulas that can be implemented whenever one has to take an oath. There we'll find back up for such statements as *“As surely as the LORD lives”* (1 Samuel 14:39; and altogether 43 times in the Old Testament) or, *“May God deal with ... be it ever so severely”* (2 Samuel 3:9). Paul also swore by an oath many times. He says in 2 Corinthians 1:23, *“I call God as my witness!”* and in Romans 1:9 he says, *“God ... is my witness ...”*

The book of Hebrews reports that God Himself has sworn an oath. In chapter 6:13-16 we read, *“When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no-one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, ‘I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.’ And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. Men swear by someone greater than themselves, **and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument.**”* This is very important. Hence we see that when someone uses the name of God as a witness, all argument should end.

To sum it up then, we should not call on God frivolously. Instead we should let our yes be yes and our no be no in our daily lives so that we won't misuse God's name. However, when a case of necessity arises, when we have been slandered and face false accusations, not only before a court of law, but in cases within the body of Christ, we may and should call upon God as a witness.

As a result of a person taking such an oath, we should then exonerate that person, and believe and trust him or her. If however, a person misuses the name of God when he or she calls upon Him, the wrath of God that is against such a person is great. So if you have a charge against a brother and accuse him, and he calls upon God as his witness and swears he's telling the truth, please be satisfied and leave the rest up to the Lord in Whose presence he has sworn.

And lastly, some very dear people have come to me over and over again whose consciences have been uneasy because they have had to swear in court. I want to tell you this. Your consciences do not have to be troubled unless you have had to swear before the powers that be without God, as it was in the case of the Nazi regime. If you have sworn uprightly and truthfully, with a clear conscience and to the best of your knowledge before God, then it is in accordance with what the Bible states as the right way to take an oath.

For this reason, we should love the Commandments of God. We shouldn't love them only because we will be blessed but because we will live by them to the honor of God and for our joy. We want to embrace the Third Commandment in accordance with what it calls for and honor His name when we come together in reverent worship. When we come together for worship, we shouldn't use the name of the Lord solemnly while we live lives that don't reflect what we profess. So let us never commit perjury and tell a lie while we swear in God's name. May God help us to do so, in Jesus' name.

The Third Commandment: Do not misuse the name of God II²³

“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name“
(Exodus 20:7).

How often have we heard someone exclaim “Oh God!”, while that person is conversing with another? Such a person wants to express surprise about something or intends to air his frustration about a matter. How frequently too, have we heard the words “Thank God”, as a sigh of relief, not intending to really thank God? Who hasn’t listened to someone say, “Gosh!”? Did you know that even that word is nothing else but God’s name? In all these examples we verbally express the name of God, without really speaking to God or without being even aware of using His name. You might ask, “Is that such a problem? Isn’t God happy if we mention His name at all in this secular world of ours? Is it really such a big deal if I choose to use the name of God verbally or not?”

In God’s eyes, the honor of His name is very important

For God, heeding His name was of such significance, that He formulated it this way in the Third Commandment: *“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name”* (Exodus 20:7). Now, what does misusing the name of God really mean?

It might be that we believers simply repeat certain prayers without really thinking too much about what we are saying. In other words they are an automatic repetition. What went through your mind, for example, the last time

²³ Televised message, dated December 13, 1998

you said the Lord's Prayer? Did you speak to God your heavenly Father from deep within, or did your mind roam all over the place as you repeated that prayer?

In our everyday lives there are many cases in which we use the name of God without much thought of what we are saying. Fact of the matter is whoever uses the words "Oh God" or "Gosh" is simply calling on the name of God. Do we really intend to call on His name? Isn't it much more of a thoughtless use of His name? In actuality, it isn't that one intends to speak to Him at all. One just simply repeats it. The name of God has become an empty phrase. How about when someone says, "Thank God"? Does he mean what he is saying? In cases like these, for instance, are we really thanking God that we escaped the accident "by the skin of our teeth", as the saying goes? Mostly we intend to express that we are glad to have been spared by fate. The expression, "Thank God", has become nothing more than an empty expression – and this is so even though we really have every reason to be thankful to God in many ways.

The misuse of God's name is no simple thing

The most thoughtless use of God's name however, is evident in such terms such as "O gosh", or "Jees!". These words can be traced back to a time when people knew about the Third Commandment and intended to do what they said. However, on the other hand, people just felt comfortable using phrases without thinking. So as to accommodate all this, they just decided to avoid using the name of God in its entirety. In this way "O God" became "O Gosh" and "Jesus" became "Jees". But God will not cause Himself to be conned by this. We should much rather admit to God and ourselves that we have misused His name over and over, and in diverse ways continue to do so.

Why are we occupying our time with this question? Well, you may be thinking, "Even if I'm misusing God's

name; He is so far away if at all existent.” Sooner or later however, there will be consequences for this. The fact is that God has given the reasons why this shouldn’t be done in the second part of this Commandment. He said to Moses: *“For the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name”* (Exodus 20:7). God is holy. That is why it shouldn’t be of less meaning how we are in our dealings with Him. He demands us to give an account for the words we use. So when we use God’s name thoughtlessly, we will have to bear the consequences for doing so. Just as it states in the Commandment, God will not *“hold anyone guiltless”* who misuse His name.

Using God’s name in the right manner

Maybe you now ask yourself, “Should a person use the name of God at all?” O yes! When we read in the Third Commandment that God forbids the misuse of His name, we should not be in doubt that He wants us to use it in the right way. The prophet Joel once said, *“And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved”* (Joel 2:32). In the New Testament the Apostle Paul relates this statement to Jesus when he said, *“Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which he must be saved”* (Acts 4:12). So there is salvation in using God’s name in the right manner.

If you are in need of being saved from your sins – and you need to be, – then do not hesitate to call on the name of the Lord in sincerity. Also, if you’ve recognized that you are in breach of using the name God wrongfully, don’t wait until you have to suffer the consequences. Rather, come today to Jesus in prayer and confess your guilt to Him. You can rest assured that God will forgive your sins. With your whole heart, just tell Him “Lord Jesus Christ, I want you to be my Savior!” Admittedly, it is forbidden to say “Jees”,

but you can, with sincerity, indeed say “Jesus Christ is Lord!” or quite personally, “Jesus is my Lord”.

This is when many other Christians who have experienced the forgiveness of sins, may have all reasons to say, “Thank God!” People will then believe that what they say is what they mean, because it will come from the bottom of their hearts. May God grant that you will call on the name of the Lord to receive salvation.

The Fourth Commandment: Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy²⁴

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” (Exodus 20:8-11)

When we looked at the Ten Commandments as such, we discussed how a Christian relates to the Law. Born-again believers love the Law because it reveals the divine will for us. Anybody whose mind has been renewed by the Holy Spirit will find pleasure in doing God’s will and obeying Him from the bottom of their hearts.

Being born-again has some very practical consequences

Obviously, being redeemed by Christ has an ethical dimension as well. A living faith is not only what you say. It goes hand in hand with how you live in your day-to-day walk with Christ. The real statement of faith is not so much what you say, actually, but what you do. Faith, then, is a particular walk of life.

A Christian’s conduct and ethics are determined by the morals of the Bible. Concerning this issue, the Apostle Paul had this to say in his letter to Titus: *“Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to*

²⁴ Sermon preached on October 25, 1998

purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (2:14). A long time before him, we could already find this in Scripture: “... those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20:6). Word and deed, they both belong together.

Let us now take an in-depth view of the Fourth Commandment, which consists of two instructions.

Six days of labor

“Six days you shall labor”. This does not imply that we have to work for six days in a paid job. Labor can refer to a number of jobs or duties, including housework, voluntary and charitable work.

Idleness and laziness are at the other end of the scale and clearly stipulate sinful behavior, as the Bible repeatedly teaches us. One very famous example is a quote from Proverbs 6:6: *“Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!”* Or let us focus on 1 Thessalonians 4:11: *“Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.”*

So the Bible takes a clear stand against something that has become pretty popular nowadays, something we might call living as a parasite whereby someone lives at the expense of others. Paul admonishes the church of Thessaloniki quite severely: *“For even when we were with you we gave you this rule: ‘If a man will not work, he shall not eat.’ We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12).*

In the Fourth Commandment, God calls us to work because it is His nature. He Himself is diligent and busy, as

we can learn from the book of Genesis, for instance: *“On the seventh day he rested from all his work”* (2:2). Other accounts can be found in Psalms or the book of Romans: *“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands”* (Psalm 19:1); *“For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities ... have been clearly seen, being understood from what had been made”* (Romans 1:20).

Once God had created, He did not turn away from this world. He still reigns and moves up to this very day. He is the One Who sustains everything He created, Who saves people, Who enlarges the body of Christ and Who fulfills prophecy. God does not work six days only; the Bible informs us that *“he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep”* (Psalm 121:4)

Jesus was extraordinarily effective. Isaiah could already foresee this in some way: *“He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied”* (53:11; KJV). Jesus did not shy away from practical work either; take his apprenticeship as a carpenter with his earthly father as an example. The gospels testify to the fact that, under all circumstances, Jesus was willing to serve others. Oftentimes, this kind of conduct even kept him from eating or getting a proper rest for a few hours at least. If He wanted to enjoy fellowship with His Father without any distractions or interruptions, He had to get up in the wee hours of the morning. Therefore, if you love God and want to be like Jesus, you can’t be a friend of idleness.

Evidently, work is not a curse, as some people try to tell us. They take a superficial glance at Scripture and come up with the idea that work only came into existence because God wanted to punish man when he fell in the Garden of Eden. This opinion is outright wrong. The book of Genesis clearly shows that God assigned work to Adam and Eve even before they sinned. Let us study the particular verse

together: *“The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15)*. We are thus safe in stating that work is not a consequence of man’s sinful behavior. On the other hand, we need to point out that God did place a curse on work in so far that it will be accompanied by thorns and thistles and the sweat and painful toil.

Not only in the Garden of Eden was there labor. We will also work in heaven. Please, turn with me to the book of Revelation. Here, we can see what God has to say about those who have been made clean in the blood of the Lamb: *“They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple” (7:15)*. There will be a difference, however. Exhaustion and painful toil will no longer exist. We will not grow tired or weary anymore because we will have been freed from our weak, mortal bodies.

So God Himself is the provider of all labor. Work is part of the ordinances and statutes He set for Creation. It is a gift that He bestowed upon us. Some folks claim “This and that I got because I worked for it”. How can they forget that they would have never received the job if it hadn’t been for God? *“Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain” (Psalm 127:1)*.

The book of Deuteronomy supplies us with further evidence of the fact that God is the source of our labor: *“You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirm his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today” (8:17-18)*.

Let us hop over to the book of Exodus. In chapter 31:2-5, we can find an account on the artists and craftsmen that were supposed to work on the Tent of Meeting: *“See, I have chosen Bezalel, son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe*

of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability, and knowledge in all kinds of crafts – to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship.”

So let me underline that God blesses us with this gift called labor. Every day anew we have the privilege of asking Him to fill us with His Holy Spirit so that we can do a good job in the assignments ahead. You might be employed at a work place where your superior is difficult or your colleagues are scheming. I'd like to pray for you, asking God to fill you with His Spirit and to grant you success at what you do while others can only shake their heads in amazement. Remember Joseph? Even his adversaries had to commend him: *“Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God? ... There is no-one so discerning and wise as you” (Genesis 41:38-39).*

Labor is neither an end in itself nor simply there to make a living. Its primary purpose is to serve God. Colossians 3:17 tells us quite plainly: *“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus; giving thanks to God the Father through him”.*

The seventh day is the day of the Lord

Scores of Christians believe that with the arrival of the New Testament, the law regarding the keeping of the Sabbath is no longer applicable. They are right, at least in one respect. Paul explicitly stated: *“One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Romans 14:5).* Somewhere else, the Apostle gives us the reason for this view: *“Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.*

These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ” (Colossians 2:16-17).

These verses served a purpose: They were meant to put those Jewish Christians in their place who intended to impose the rituals of the Sabbath on the Christian churches. According to the Mosaic Law, such rituals were very detailed; the Pharisees had even gone beyond that, making them still more complicated. Paul considered Old Testament rituals pertaining to the Sabbath no longer necessary, because Christ came and fulfilled them. The same could be said for the sacrificial offerings of animals. Christ was sacrificed once and for all, thereby rendering any further offerings irrelevant. As Paul said, those acts merely foreshadowed what was to come true in Christ.

In fact, Christ bought a rest for His people by redeeming them – a rest for all the days of the week, why, even an eternal rest! It would therefore actually dishonor Him, if we were still to hold on to those preliminary phenomena and acts that He replaced in Himself.

That’s why we are no longer required to keep the laws pertaining to the keeping of the Sabbath. Our job today is somewhat different: We are to make every effort to enter the rest in the faith (cf. Hebrews 3:11). It is that rest that Christ bought for us when He laid down His life for us. It is a kind of rest where we can take a break from our own work. Consequently, our new day of Sabbath has changed. Our Sabbath is a “today”, a day of salvation (cf. Hebrews 4:7-9). We may enjoy this day forever more in all eternity and without ceasing. Anyone who has reached that point of divine rest can and will rest from his own toil (cf. Hebrews 4:10). The Jewish Sabbath is thus a reflection of the gospel: Our own work is finished, by which we would want to attain salvation. Instead, we may rest assured in God’s grace which became evident in Jesus. The Law with all its re-

quirements and commands, could never give us that kind of rest. What a beautiful Sabbath indeed!

The Fourth Commandment reminds the children of Israel of keeping the Sabbath because God led them out of Egyptian captivity and slavery. It serves to point out the relationship between the Sabbath on the one hand, and the gospel on the other: *“Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day”* (Deuteronomy 5:15). Israel was delivered. That was not just any event but something that God used so that the people would once again remember to keep the Sabbath day. And yet, both their deliverance and the renewed admonishment to observe the Sabbath could only foreshadow the coming redemption and the subsequent rest in faith, granted to all of God’s children. Therefore, the ceremonial significance the Sabbath day bears has gone.

The Sabbath day – Part of the Divine order of Creation

As we know, it pleased God to put the Sabbath law not only in the Ceremonial Law but also in the Moral Law, or to be more specific: the Ten Commandments. While the Ceremonial Law was fulfilled in Christ, the Moral Law remains valid forever and always. The Old Testament records that God ordered Moses to write down both the Ceremonial Law and the Civil Law, i.e. the one that stipulated the way the state of Israel should be governed. The Ten Commandments, however, God did not dictate but rather wrote Himself on the stone tablets (Exodus 31:18). In doing so, He stressed that those Commandments would not be subject to change. The Sermon on the Mount is a powerful confirmation of this fact.

So why did God place the Sabbath law both in the Ceremonial Law and on the stone tablets of the Moral Law? Surely, it has more than ceremonial meaning only. The Sabbath law shares in the fundamental way God laid out Creation. Evidence of this is given in Exodus 20; let's read the relevant passage once again, where the Sabbath law is not linked to the deliverance of the Israelites but Creation itself: "*For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day*". **The Sabbath law remains valid because it is not to do with redemption but with creation.**

Jesus basically says the same in Mark 2:27: "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath*". Jesus does not speak of Jews and Christians concerning their redemption. Jesus has all people in mind. All of them may partake in the blessed order of things that God set from the beginning up to the very end of Creation. Just like marriage has been anchored in the divine order of life and will remain this way always, a weekly day of rest has been put aside since the beginning. It comes natural then to find it expressed in the Ten Commandments as well.

It boils down to the fact that the Fourth Commandment, along with all the other ones, is a command of love. According to Creation, everybody, including servant, workhorse and alien, should enjoy a day of rest. Observing the Sabbath thus has a value apart from the redemptive one. So if God in His mercy, grants us a day that should be sanctified, we should by all means treat it differently from all the other days, shouldn't we?! Of course, as far as our inner life, i.e. our elementary relationship towards God is concerned, we don't need to observe any particular day. Monday or Tuesday is as good as Sunday. No matter the day, God Himself gave us a day to physically relax, to rest mentally, and to enjoy assembling ourselves to His honor in order to receive His Word. No other day can give us just that.

Hence, we take joy in submitting church life to the order of Creation also. After six days of work, let us meet on a special day to read the Bible and to pray. What a blessing that God gave us a day when we don't need to work or look for things to occupy our minds with; a day when we have the time to especially devote ourselves to Him. Let us celebrate the day of the Lord according to His Commandments and leave all worldly activities and pleasures. We want to receive this day as a gift from God and sanctify it because we are thankful to Him and love Him! It is my conviction that it is sinful to spend this particular day in the same profane, hectic and stressful way like all the others.

**Why do we celebrate the Sabbath day on a Sunday?
Why don't we do as the Jews do and observe the Sabbath on a Saturday?**

In the course of our discussion, we have learned that the Sabbath law is an integral part of the divine order of Creation; also we noted that the Sabbath law, as part of the Old Testament statutes, served to foreshadow Christ. Moving on from here, we want to find out how we should understand the following verse: *“Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God.”* Well, not in the sense that we set up a fixed order of days. The Commandment simply doesn't inform us which day needs to be the first, which one the seventh. The only thing it does say is that we should labor for six days and rest for one. This is not about days anyway but the fundamental principle of making one out of seven days a day of rest.

We all know that Christ died on a Friday and rose on the following Sunday. That's why the first church triumphed on that day and came together on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). In so far we do justice both to the aspect of redemption and creation when we celebrate the Sabbath on a Sunday. After six work days, Sunday naturally turns into

the seventh day also. It was the day of Resurrection, the day of victory over being a slave to sin and death. The first Christians used to meet on a Sunday; we can derive this from Paul's instruction of the Corinthians to collect money for the poor on this day (1 Corinthians 16:2). So let us celebrate the day of the Lord as His Church in that we come together regularly to hear His Word – unless someone cannot attend due to job-related reasons.

The Fifth Commandment: Honor your father and your mother²⁵

*“Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your god is giving you.”
(Exodus 20:12)*

The Fifth Commandment calls us into honoring our father and mother. It touches upon an area that frequently goes against the will of the natural person: Having to submit to authorities. As we have seen, in the very First Commandment already, God identified Himself as an authority; He declared: *“I am the LORD, your God” (Exodus 20:2)*. Due to his fallen nature, man usually rejects the idea of having to accept someone in authority. Instead, he would rather want to elevate himself to a position where he is above others. Such an attitude is becoming increasingly popular, taking such buzz words as “permissiveness” and “liberation” into account.

How should we exactly comprehend what the Fifth Commandment is all about? The answer is provided in the New Testament where the Ten Commandments are frequently dealt with and where an interpretation is offered. In passing, let me highlight that the validity of the Commandments is not treated as a footnote in the New Testament; on the contrary, the New Testament fully supports the Commandments.

The validity of the Ten Commandments in the New Testament

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Himself tells us that He did not come to do away with the Law but to fulfill it:

²⁵ Sermon, delivered on November 01, 1998

“Until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law” (Matthew 5:18). In the following verses, He expounds on the various Commandments, revealing their deeper meaning to us.

Please, note that Jesus again places emphasis on the validity and correctness of the Commandments when He talks with a young man. As recorded in Matthew 19:16, the man asks him: *“Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”* Jesus then draws his attention to the various Commandments.

The Apostle Paul repeatedly refers to the Ten Commandments in his letters. Romans 3:31 gives us a general account of his view on the Law: *“Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law”*. The KJV Bible translates this passage like this: *“... we establish the law”*. In the same book, Paul lists the Commandments: *“The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery’, ‘Do not murder’, ‘Do not steal’, ‘Do not covet’, and whatever other commandment there may be, thereby relating to the other Commandments not mentioned here, are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (13:9).*

By-the-way, the rule Paul states in this verse is by no means a re-invention by the Apostle or Jesus. In fact, it is simply a quote taken from the third book of Moses (Leviticus 19:18), found in the Old Testament, the part of the Bible the Ten Commandments are taken from. So love is not the end of the Law but *“the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:10)*, i.e. its observation and keeping.

Would you believe that some people even accuse Jesus of not having paid attention to the Commandments? They reckon He Himself broke the Law. Such an assumption is completely incredible and absurd because it states in effect that Jesus wasn't perfect and without sin after all. If Jesus

was a trespasser and thereby unable to keep the requirements the Law had, He could consequently not be our Redeemer. Such thinking is not only foreign to what the Bible teaches – it is an outright lie!

The Pharisees and their traditions

So what is true then? True is that Jesus did frequently break laws and traditions that humans had put in place. There was a motive for His behavior though, which is disclosed to us in Mark 7:1-13: *“The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered round Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were ‘unclean’, that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the market-place they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, ‘Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?’ He replied, ‘Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.’ And he said to them: ‘You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you **nullify the word of God by***

your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.’”

Matthew 15:1-9 renders the parallel account of the Scripture passage we just read. I’d like to submit to you parts of an interpretation of the verses in Matthew, provided by the so-called “Wuppertaler Studienbibel”, a Bible version for in-depth study purposes. This particular Bible version elaborates on the historical background of our Bible passage. “In the capital of Jerusalem, one was increasingly faced with the enormous problem that Jesus and his disciples were not keeping the traditions of the elders. The indictment against Jesus went to the highest spiritual authority. It said: Jesus’ disciples are breaking the traditions of the elders, i.e. the rules and regulations that the rabbis and Pharisees had derived from the Mosaic Law. When Jesus walked the earth, those rules were passed on orally still, later they were written down in the Talmud, a book of rabbinical regulations. Disregarding the rules was a serious crime. Keeping them was absolutely mandatory; according to the Talmud, one could face being banned (excommunicated) if he or she were in breach of them. During Jesus’ time and even way before that, Israel had the Law of Moses (the Torah), found in the Old Testament, along with the compilation of the other laws, the so-called set of regulations or traditions, established by the elders!”²⁶

Evidently, the Pharisees did not only adhere to Scripture but also relied on a man-made set of laws that consisted of explanatory remarks and supplements pertaining to the various passages of the Bible. The second set of law originated in the minds of important teachers of ancient times. Its original purpose was to erect a “hedge” around the Torah so that by keeping the second law it would become im-

²⁶ Found in a (German) book by Fritz Rienecker, called: Wuppertaler Studienbibel, Matthäus-Evangelium. R. Brockhaus-Verlag: Wuppertal, 1961. Pages 208-209

possible to break the first. The second law was full of rules that went far beyond what the first law actually stated. As time went on, the second law with all its regulations gained more and more in weight, so that it didn't take long for these to be seen as mere add-ons only. Suddenly these additions actually commanded strictest obedience and this, in turn, placed them above the Word of God.

One crucial part of the tradition concerned the purification law, a law the Pharisees referred to when they found fault with Jesus' disciples' failure to wash their hands prior to eating. The Mosaic Law laid down in the fifteenth chapter of the book of Leviticus forbade eating anything holy, i.e. sacrificial food, with unclean hands. The teachers of the Law, however, made it a rule to wash your hands before any kind of meal. This included the eating of bread which the Jews considered a main course, sort of, since they had it with every course of the meal and even wrapped other food in it. Using cutlery like fork and knife was not the custom then.

Washing your hands was a meticulously described activity: two times, water had to be poured from a container over your hands up to your wrists; that's how far the uncleanness of your hands was perceived. During the first washing, you had to ascertain that nothing, not even a tiny piece of gravel or a splinter, happened to be in or on your hands because any such thing would have kept that part of your body, and ultimately all of your hands, unclean. During the second washing, you had to be even more careful. There used to be numerous other rules still, pertaining to the type of container for the water, the way you would pour it, the number of people who could have water poured over their hands at a time, the person suitable for the job of pouring, etc. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law regarded such questions as highly important. Jesus' disciples did not heed to these rules and Jesus did not punish them either.

What we can learn from this is that the only laws that Jesus did not observe were those that were man-made. He had a pretty good reason for acting like that. In His eyes, the real trespassers were the Pharisees. Come down to Mark 7:8 with me to see for yourself, what He says in this respect: *“You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men”*. We are talking sinning in a big way here!

For Jesus, only God’s Law was binding. The traditions of the elders, at least partly, opposed God’s Law – something Jesus demonstrates when He draws their attention to the Commandment that deals with our relationship towards our parents. In Mark 7:10, we find a verse where He reminds them of the Mosaic Law: *“Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’”* In contrast to this, the regulation the Pharisees had thought up said: *“A child that is supposed to support his parents when they are old can be relieved from this duty if he makes a monetary offering to the Lord in the temple”*. That kind of financial provision was called Corban. The essence of this regulation was that one could dispose of his caring responsibility for his parents by a gift devoted to God. The Pharisees did not rebuke the children for their apparent wickedness but praised them instead for making such extraordinary religious sacrifice to the temple. Jesus calls a spade a spade when He, quite bluntly, tells them something like this: *“You hypocrites! You honor me with your lips, but your hearts are far from me. You observe man-made rules but turn away from God’s Law!”*

What the Fifth Commandment means to us today

Of course, we don’t pay any Corban anymore. And yet, the question is still the same: Do we try in some way or another to relieve ourselves of our responsibility of caring for

our parents? Do we come up with all sorts of lame excuses just to be able to pursue our own selfish motives? Are our parents, somehow, stumbling blocks in our desire for self-actualization? I am not saying that there could never be a situation where it becomes impossible to look after our parents when they are old and needy. A daughter might be physically more ailing than her mother, thereby not being capable of giving her the care she needs. I am talking about young folks who are too comfortable to care and are thus glad to see their parents move into a senior people's home for good. Such behavior grossly violates the God-given command of looking after our parents.

When the Bible calls us to honor both our father and our mother, Scripture does not only mean their material well-being. The Commandment also applies to the way we treat them. Respect is a key word here. Please, bear in mind that the respect we ought to show to the elderly comprises more than just our parents. It also includes our fathers and mothers-in-Christ. I am very concerned when I see how disrespectful and impudent some people even in the body of Christ can be. They push their brothers and sisters-in-Christ aside, who have been faithfully serving the Lord for decades. Why should the opinions of the elderly be discarded as outdated and old-fashioned? Naturally, the older people-in-Christ make mistakes also. Does that, however, give us the right to pay them less respect and recognition? If we take the Fifth Commandment seriously, the answer to this question is obvious.

I am well aware of the fact that obeying your parents might make you wonder where to draw the line. Must I obey them even if they demand something that runs counter to my own conscience or – more importantly – the will of God? Let us study the life of Jesus to gain more insight here, and thus be able to follow Him more closely.

Jesus and the Fifth Commandment

When Jesus was twelve years old, He traveled along with His parents to Jerusalem. On their way back, He was missing. He had remained in the temple although that caused His parents to grow sad and anxious. So why did Jesus do that? The answer is simple: There can very well be situations where you are to obey God first, then man. This does not merely hold true for one's parents but also for the authorities above oneself, for instance (cf. Acts 5:29). After this incident on their way from Jerusalem, the Bible tells us something fairly interesting: *"Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them"* (Luke 2:51). Without a doubt, Jesus very well took heed of the Fifth Commandment.

Even at the Cross of Calvary, when Jesus carried out the powerful works of salvation, He took care of His mother. The gospel of John 19:27 reports how He asked John, the disciple that He loved, to regard Mary; He said to John: *"Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.*"

The Fifth Commandment – other Biblical examples

Joseph is another example of one who paid honor to his father. He did so when he was the governor of Egypt. During the famine that had befallen Israel, Jacob lived in Egypt. Just before he died, he blessed his sons. The book of Genesis describes a part of that moment like this: Joseph *"bowed down with his face to the ground"* (48:12).

First Kings 2:19 details us on how Solomon showed respect and honor to his mother Bathsheba: *"When Bathsheba went to King Solomon to speak to him for Adonijah, the king stood up to meet her, bowed down to her and sat down on his throne. He had a throne brought for the king's mother, and she sat down at his right hand."*

The Apostle Paul repeatedly dealt with the Fifth Commandment, e.g. in Colossians 3:18-20. Here, he first talks about wives submitting to their husbands; then, he continues and also looks at what children are supposed to do: *“Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord”*. One verse later, we can find: *“Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged”* (v 21). In Ephesians 6:1-3, he puts it slightly different: *“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ – which is the first commandment with a promise – that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth”*. Once again, the verse right after has this for us: *“Fathers, do not exasperate your children. Instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord”* (v 4).

These Bible passages leave no room for equating honoring one’s parents with blind obedience. Instead, they testify to a relationship between both parties that is grounded *“in the Lord”*. What does that mean? This is the answer: We are able to obey our parents, if we are led by the Holy Spirit, while we firmly stand on the Word of God. It also means, however, that we don’t stop paying them honor and respect as we grow up. Sure, our relationship changes but the fundamentals remain the same. That also goes for the parents: It is their obligation to be proper parents to them *“in the Lord”*; the Commandment does not allow tyranny. Please, let me emphasize in this respect, that there is actually no Commandment at all that permits tyranny. Paul’s admonishments are pretty clear here. So, in marriage as well, the love of God governs the way we live together in accordance with His divine order; the husband is not meant to rule over his wife.

Parents need to keep in mind that there comes a day when their kids are no longer kids; so parents must let go of them. That's when "*a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh*" (Genesis 2:24). Even then, no doubt, the Commandment applies, if only in a different context.

In a nutshell, we could say, that honoring your parents means obeying them in childhood, and paying them respect in adulthood, as well as taking care of them when they are aging. May God give you His grace to do so.

The Sixth Commandment: You shall not murder I²⁷

“You shall not murder.”

(Exodus 20:13)

We have already pointed out that God inscribed the Ten Commandments with His own finger (Exodus 31:18). The other commands, however, He imparted to Moses by His Holy Spirit; Moses, in turn, then wrote them down. By putting the Ten Commandments on the two stone tablets Himself, God wanted to reveal to us the unchangeable and eternal character of these statutes.

Taking a closer look at the Commandments, we detect that they deal with two different areas: One pertains to God’s relationship with mankind, the other to the relationships we have with one another. The Bible does not tell us how the Commandments were depicted on the stone tablets, i.e. which one went where.

Personally, I can imagine that each tablet carried five Commandments. The first one might have displayed the Commandments concerning the relationship we have with God and the observation of His honor: *“You shall have no other gods before me”*; *“You shall not make for yourself an idol ...”*; *“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD, your God”*; *“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy”*. The Commandment regarding our parents *“Honor your father and your mother”* probably belonged to the first tablet also, even though it ties in with the area that affects human relationships.

According to the Heidelberg Catechism, the Sixth Commandment is the opening Commandment of the second area that detail us on how mankind is to live together: *“You shall not murder”*; *“You shall not commit adultery”*; *“You*

²⁷ Sermon, delivered on November 08, 1998

shall not steal"; "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor": "You shall not covet ...".

We have no problem in understanding what God intends when He says; "You shall not murder". When it comes to the practical implementation of the Commandment, however, a number of questions emerge: Take the following one, for instance. When do you really call something murder? We all know that heated discussions and much controversy are generated about such issues.

Some statistics might be helpful in this regard²⁸. More than 850,000 people are murdered annually. This number does not include people getting killed because of war or children being aborted. In addition to the figure I just gave you, we should bear in mind that about one million people die due to warfare every year. We don't need to stress how perturbing data like this is. Such information makes us wonder where this readiness for violence stems from. I'm afraid the answer is not hard to find. Reports have it that in the US every young person is exposed to 200,000 violent acts and 25,000 murders on TV before he or she reaches age 18. Does that impact the young person? Without the shadow of a doubt.

Focal point: Abortion

I shall confine myself to concentrating on one particular aspect of the Sixth Commandment, and that is abortion. It has been heavy on my heart for quite a while. On a global scale, fifty million abortions take place every year. How many people is that? Approximately the population of England. Statistics reveal that in Japan and France, every second child is killed in the mother's womb; for Germany and the Netherlands, it's every fourth child.

²⁸ Quoted as stated in the (German) book by: Thomas Schirmacher. Ethik. 2 Volumes. Hänssler-Verlag, Stuttgart. 1994. Vol. 2. Page 679 (Please, check that book also for the exact reference provided here)

Personally, I can see but one case that would justify a termination of pregnancy. It is the scenario where the mother's life would be endangered and one would have to sacrifice the life of the child in order to save the mother²⁹. Anything other than this situation is to be called murder. This is what the Bible teaches and what I am convinced of as well.

Please, allow me to outline some of the reasons why **abortion is murder**:

“You shall not murder”; the Commandment forbids abortion

As simple as the Commandment “*You shall not murder*” is, it clearly forbids abortion. There are those who view abortion as some sort of contraceptive means that can be used to block out the consequences of their sexual activities. Such an opinion shows that those people assign a higher priority to their sexual drive than to the right of another person's survival. This kind of behavior is a major sin – regardless of the fact that our society no longer says so.

Children are a gift from God

Abortion is murder. Why? Because children are a gift and a blessing God bestows upon us. The Bible unmistakably states this fact; please, have a look at Psalm 127:3: “*Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him*”. So children are not what we are often told: A real burden. Instead, they reflect God's blessing. The Scriptures are full of examples; some of them we will study in more detail a bit later on. If a woman feels she has the right to choose if she wants to keep the baby or not, she greatly errs. She is not entitled to determine whether her child may live or die. God is. He creates life and blesses us with children.

²⁹ cf. Thomas Schirrmacher. Ethik. Vol. 2. Page 721f

We all know the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When we examine the lives of their wives – Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel – we can gain a clear understanding of what I just stated in the previous paragraph. Those women had one particular feature in common: They were all barren. It was Rachel who cried out in despair, as she addressed her husband Jacob: “*Give me children, or I’ll die!*” Angrily, he responded: “*Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?*” (Genesis 30:1-2). Ancient Israel knew, beyond any question, that children were not the result of a biological coincidence. People then were certain that kids were a gift from God and were surely nothing that they could have at their disposal as they pleased. You will recollect the famous story of a lady named Hannah. In her we find another woman who was greatly distressed because she was barren; so she went up to the temple and wept over her fate. When God chose to answer her prayer for a child and blessed her with little baby boy Samuel, she did what she had promised to the Lord: She returned to the house of the Lord and brought her son there. Her marvelous song of praise reflected what she felt deep down in her heart – adoration and thanksgiving. Hannah knew for a fact that her child was a gift, received right from the Master’s hand.

We may learn from these examples. Contemporary thinking has it, that children are often looked at as additional burdens that stand in the way for any woman who pursues developing her potential to the fullest. Christians like us, however, commit themselves to learning anew that children are from the Lord and a big blessing indeed. Please, make sure you get me right here: I am supporting a responsible management of birth control; it makes sense and is appropriate. Nevertheless is it desirable to be more open-minded towards children, and that certainly holds for our churches as well.

Guess what the forecast for Germany in 2030 looks like: “If birth rates continue to be so low, the number of Germans at a current level of 75 million people will plunge to 22 million by the end of the century; this figure does not account for naturalization and double citizenships.”³⁰ In other words, the German people will become a nation of grey heads, a people without youth or future – unless the decline in population will be compensated by a significant rise in immigration by foreigners.

Unborn children have a relationship with God

According to Scripture, there are other reasons why unborn children must not be killed. One of them is based on the fact that even in the mother’s womb, a child has a relationship with God. A moot point in this context concerns the question as of when an embryo can be called a person. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer answered it like this: “Arguing the question whether the unborn child is a person yet or not only blurs the point; facts are quite simple really: As for God, He wanted to create a person. This person, however, was willfully stopped from developing. And that is nothing but murder.”³¹

Body and soul are inseparably tied to one another. Surely an unborn child has a soul already. If we want to know what relationship even an unborn child in the womb of the mother has with God, the Bible has plenty to say about it: *“From my birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother’s womb” (Psalm 71:6)*. Or look at this,

³⁰ Found in a (German) book by Eckard Nickig, called: „Werden Deutschlands Großstädte islamisch?“. Quote stated in the German magazine called: *idea Spektrum* 23/2000 Pages 16-18. Here: Page 17 (Please, check back with this magazine for other sources of information and references)

³¹ Found in a (German) book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, called: *Ethik*. Chr. Kaiser Verlag, München: 1958⁴. Page 118

please. *“From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother’s womb you have been my God” (Psalm 22:10).*

Also, right in the mother’s womb a person will be predestined and sanctified; take the prophet Jeremiah as an example: *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5).*

Don’t we all recall the events surrounding the Christmas story? It was then that the angel gave Zechariah a message in which he foretold the birth of his son, John the Baptist; Luke 1:15 informs us about what he actually said: *“He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth”*. It is interesting to note that the expression *“from birth”* has a much broader scope than we might assume. It does not so much refer to the time after delivery but rather before the occurrence. This we can safely conclude from verses 41 and 42: *“When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!’ ... As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.”*

Isaiah says about himself: *“Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name” (49:1)*. The Apostle Paul has something quite similar to say about himself: *“... God ... set me apart from birth and called me by his grace” (Galatians 1:15).*

Scripture is literally littered with verses that describe how God created us and formed us in the womb of our mothers. Job 10:8 is an example here: *“Your hands shaped me and made me”*. Or what about the very popular psalm 139? *“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you*

when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body” (13-16).

Scripture does not leave us in the dark about the original sin either, i.e. the fact that we are all sinners even before we get born. If you would but turn to Psalm 51:5 with me: *“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me”*. Come also down to Psalm 58:4: *“Even from birth the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward and speak lies”*. Even unborn children have already a relationship with God and are under condemnation due to the original sin. It is only by the grace of God that they will be accepted.

The Bible sheds light on another issue, too. What if a baby dies before getting born? Job asks: *“Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?” (Job 3:11)*. We also find passages that talk about *“in the womb”* (cf. Job 10:18; Jeremiah 20:17-18). Of course, one can die even in the mother’s womb. That was quite clear to Job who certainly regarded an embryo as a full-fledged person as opposed to an incomplete ‘something’ that you could just dispose of. Let’s make no mistake here: If someone chooses to terminate the life of a child that God gave that person, the Bible views it as a moment of perishing and ultimately death – in other words, murder.

Let us read what Job says in the following verse: *“If only I had never come into being, or had been carried straight from the womb to the grave” (Job 10:19)*. Apparently, the Bible also teaches that a child that died prematurely in his or her mother’s womb should be buried.

The Mosaic Law forbids abortion

Moses received the Civil Law. That Law forbids abortion, as we can gather from the book of Exodus: *“If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth*

prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined ... But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye ...” (21:22-25). What a stark contrast if you take the Biblical position on how to view a God-given, unborn child on the one hand, and the great injustice being done in our country over and over again, on the other!

As Christians, what can we do against this reality?

The first thing we are privileged to do is pray. We may pray not only for the fathers and mothers affected by it but also our government and all the institutions that shape the major values in our society. The churches are an example here. We also want to pray for all the pastors and ministers so that they stick to the Biblical truths and can thus provide real assistance to people in need.

In passing: Has it ever occurred to you that the very people who take a stand against death penalty oftentimes happen to be the same people who can't understand the commotion about aborting innocent, unborn children? Please, don't overlook that the Bible very well lends support to putting an offender to death, given that the person gets a fair trial in a lawful society.

First and foremost, Christians need to lead an exemplary life. What does that mean? Quite simply, that we argue the case against abortion; this includes our own situation but also communicating our conviction to people we know. It also means that we are open-minded towards children. Sad to say but there are Christians who don't do just that. Some of these Christians prefer to have no children because if they did have some, they would have to accept certain constraints, e.g. less favorable career prospects for the wife, less vacation opportunities or having to put up with clothes off the rack instead of buying up-market brands at, say, a boutique.

So I'd like to make an appeal today. Let us stop looking at children as a hindrance or burden; instead, let us view them in the light of Scripture which tells us that they are a blessing from God! Therefore, let us rejoice about being fathers and mothers. We don't need to listen to the teachings the world has for us. So what speaks against having three, four, five, even six children as long as the mother is for it and her body can manage?

Today just like in the days gone by already, we want to plant our little apple tree and face the future hopefully. God will care for our kids and protect them, even if times turn rough. Nothing can happen to us unless God allows it. Even when we die, we can relax because we know where we are going, i.e. to our heavenly home. So do as the Bible says: Be fruitful and increase in number by the grace of God!

I'd like to comfort those who cannot have any children: You have the right to pray, just like the people we hear about in the Holy Scriptures. God may very well answer your prayers. And even if He doesn't bless you with children, you can still have them, in terms of sharing your faith with other people. That's when you can enjoy the big blessing of spiritual fatherhood and motherhood. Last but not least we want to work with a renewed commitment and a boldness to believe in Him so that we can win souls for Christ. If more and more people are born again and acknowledge the Bible as their guideline for life, we will witness a dramatic change in our society; people will eventually recognize once more that children are what the Bible told us a long time ago already – a really big gift from our loving, heavenly Father!

The Sixth Commandment: You shall not murder II³²

“You shall not murder”

(Exodus 20:13)

What about the death penalty?

One of the most widely circulated Commandments of God says, *“You shall not murder”*. Many a man and that certainly includes unbelievers, like to use this Commandment as a central piece of Biblical evidence against the death penalty. No matter your standpoint on this issue – one thing you cannot do is, speak out against it while calling on the Bible as your witness. The Scriptures are crystal clear in teaching us that God is Lord of both life and death and that it is up to Him to punish people by putting them to death, even eternal death.

That’s why we are told not to take revenge but to leave all judgment to God. Paul instructs us like this in this context: *“Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves but, rather, give place unto wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord” (Romans 12:19; KJV)*. It is His right to judge and to punish, and He, to some extent, delegates it also to the authorities in the world; the Bible informs us about this role of the authorities in Romans 13:4: *“He (= the authorities) does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment³³ on the wrongdoer”*. So the governing authorities are God’s servant; they are assigned to execute His judgment on earth. If the need arises, this task may very well call for the sword also. God stated in His Word: *“You shall*

³² Radio broadcast, dated April 11, 1999

³³ In the Greek text, we find the same word for “punishment” and “wrath” (Paul talked about “wrath” in Romans 12:19). We can thus safely conclude that there can be situations where God delegates His revenge to a representative of His.

not murder.” It is the same God Who demands the death penalty for certain types of criminal activity. If we trust God’s Word in its entirety, we cannot break His inseparable Word apart, in that we affirm what pleases us, and reject what we dislike.

Jesus didn’t do that either. In fact, He did the very opposite of it. He underlined and confirmed the Old Testament statement on death penalty when He addressed Peter in Matthew 26:52: “*Put your sword back in its place,*” ... “*for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.*” What He did in that very moment was to remind His disciple of God’s old, but nevertheless still valid, basic order of things: “*Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed*” (Genesis 9:6). So what is the correct way of looking at the death penalty in a situation in which a proper court is entitled to pass that sentence after a fair trial? The Bible has nothing against it. The Nazi trials at the city of Nuremberg after World War II could serve as an example here.

This chapter is not meant to be a plea for the introduction of the death penalty. I would like to put special emphasis on the fact, however, that, looking at it from a Biblical angle, a democratic state has the right to bear the sword, either on the basis of properly conducted court cases or in the event of having to defend the country against invaders or attackers. The Commandment does not speak against such course of action a state chooses to take.

To me, it sounds like major hypocrisy when people delight in accusing the state of carrying out the death penalty and wash their own hands in innocence at the same time. Clearly, the Sixth Commandment does not say: “The state shall not murder”. It is equally false to change the Commandment into reading: “Your neighbor shall not murder!” Instead, the Commandment states something quite different: “**You shall not murder!**” You see, it’s about you and

me. It affects every individual person. Don't we all try to gladly overlook this truth oftentimes?

Murder in your heart

Alright, alright. You might just reply that you aren't a murderer and have never killed anybody. Are you sure about this? The Bible tells us that anyone who hates his fellow-man is a murderer. The Apostle John has this plain truth for us: "*Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer*" (1 John 3:15). Breaking the Sixth Commandment starts in your heart. That's how our Lord Jesus put it as well: "*For out of the heart come evil thoughts, **murder**, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander*" (Matthew 15:19). If you carry any hate in your heart, in God's eyes you are already guilty. Along with hate comes anger or rage. Scripture sees rage as a sinful foreplay to murder. A number of passages in the Bible highlight this truth: The book of Esther speaks of rage – planning for murder (5:9). If your heart harbors any rage and you allow it to grow, rage could possibly turn into murder. For it is in Proverbs 27:4 where we find this word: "*Anger is cruel*". Amos 1:11 states that rage does indeed, "*tear perpetually*" (KJV). Finally, let us turn to the book of Genesis: "*They have killed men in their anger*" (49:6).

Just like with all the other Commandments, the Sixth Commandment does not merely address the actual deed of murder but also the motives that may lead to such a crime. German reformer Martin Luther broaches this subject in his major catechism; he writes: "Once murder is forbidden, you also rule out any reason for such action".³⁴ These reasons could range from hate, anger, bitterness, to wrath, and rage.

³⁴ To be found in a (German) book by Martin Luther called: Der große Katechismus. in: Calwer Lutherausgabe. By Wolfgang Metzger (ed.). 10 Volumes. New edition Hänssler-Verlag: Neuhausen-Stuttgart, 1996. here Vol. 1 Page 58

The Pharisees always tried to thrust the connection between deed and foregoing emotion aside. For them, the world was all bright and sunshiny unless somebody committed a “real” murder. Jesus exposes their false line of thinking when He says: *“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca’ [= an Aramaic term of contempt], is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell” (Matthew 5:21).*

Personal consequences

Never should we be proud of the fact that we haven’t murdered anyone yet. The moment rage and bitterness take over, we are faster to act than we might ever imagine. How many killers expressed afterwards that they never intended to commit the murder? And yet, they did. Surely, there must have been lots of husbands who once loved their wives dearly; nevertheless, time came when love turned to hate and they finally allowed their emotions to rule them so that a murder took place.

Before Cain killed his brother Abel, God gave him an opportunity to hear His admonishment: *“If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it” (Genesis 4:7).* Cain, on the other hand, had no pure heart. He was jealous of Abel and consequently, full of rage. The sin of murder was crouching right at his door but he wasn’t capable of controlling his anger. So he became a killer. He was one even before he actually carried out the murder; his heart and thoughts were set on it beforehand.

I strongly sense the Holy Spirit wants me to make a serious call here. Perhaps your heart also harbors strong feelings of jealousy; maybe your mind is clouded by severe bitterness; could it be that you carry an awful lot of fury and wrath inside of you? Friend, I feel led to warn you: *Sin is crouching at your door, too; you, however, must master it!*

You are asking me now how on earth you could possibly do that, mastering your hostile and painful emotions; aren't hatred and a desire to avenge yourself ruling you instead?! I don't doubt that at all. That's the very reason I give you this answer: "Please, understand that God views such feelings, desires and words as murder already. You don't need to commit the actual crime first before the Living God. He has already caught you in the act when you carried it out in the depths of your heart. That alone was enough to trespass the Sixth Commandment. Do you realize how wicked you are? Don't you want to cry over that and break down once you fathom how rotten you are?! Therefore, repent and ask God with all your heart for His forgiveness.

There is no use trying to break those chains of bitterness yourself. You can't. Now is the time to call on Jesus. He can open the jail you are in when those bad thoughts want to ensnare you. He alone is able to change your heart and to give you a new mind. He removes your heart of stone and blesses you with a soft, tender heart. The Holy Spirit pours God's love out right into your heart, making you a brand new person. You thus receive power from above that enables you to even love your greatest enemies. Dear readers, it will be a joy to any of you to "*rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice ...*" (Colossians 3:8). In the same vein, you will gladly heed what the Bible cautions us to do: "*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you*" (Ephesians 4:32). Today this miracle is happening to you. I believe that and pray for it, in the name of Jesus.

The Seventh Commandment: You shall not commit adultery I³⁵

“You shall not commit adultery.”

(Exodus 20:14)

Prefatory remark

Before we tackle today’s Bible text, I want to make a statement concerning our series of sermons pertaining to the Ten Commandments. Up to now, brothers and sisters-in-Christ as well as friends have approached me at the end of every service with criticism concerning each sermon, regardless of which Commandment I dealt with. They assumed that I meant to personally address them while I preached, and that I used this as a guise, to tell them off, so-to-speak.

Of course, this has never been the case. When I proclaim the Word of God, it is my duty to proclaim it with clarity. At such times my presentations, quite understandably, cannot assume a character of infallibility. However, it can indeed be the case that God uses my sermons through the work of the Holy Spirit, to convict those who hear of their sins. So if you have felt that you’ve been addressed, please confess and repent of your sins to God. If you haven’t felt reprimanded by a sermon and you’re not feeling convicted, then leave it as it is. Maybe God has been dealing with your neighbor concerning these issues.

One of the characteristics the Word of God has, is namely to penalize those who live contrary to it. In Hebrews 4:12 we read, *“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”* Of course, this is unpleasant for people. This was exactly the burden

³⁵ Sermon preached on December 13, 1998

the prophets carried. For example, Jeremiah was continuously making the effort to carefully proclaim the Word of God. However, one day he was so tired due to the continuous opposition of those who heard, that he said “*Cursed be the day I was born*” (Jeremiah 20:14).

It is also a burden for me when God lays a message on my heart, because I know the truth of God’s Word, always challenges us and, oftentimes convicts us. When I now go into dealing with The Commandment concerning adultery, be certain that I do not intend to direct my words to anyone in particular, or to judge anyone. We are all sinners in the sight of God. We will recognize this more than ever, when we note that Jesus says that adultery begins in the heart and in the thoughts. This is why no-one has a right to cast the first stone.

After these remarks, I now want to turn to the text we’ll deal with in the Bible. What’s the Bible’s definition of marriage?

Marriage is a covenant

Marriage is a covenant (see Malachi 2:14), by which a blood relationship is established. This surpasses any other relationship by far. In this way two people are amalgamated to become an inseparable unit. So a person has no closer relatives than her husband or his wife. Even the relationship between a mother and a child, which is a very intensive and close one, is subordinate to that of a husband and a wife. That’s why Genesis 2:24 has this to say, “*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.*” In other words, “*adhere to her*”. So we can see that for the sake of marriage, the bond between parent and child is loosened or, partly, disconnected.

We should see this bond of marriage between a man and a woman as given by God. That’s why we can read the fol-

lowing words in Matthew 19:6, *“Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”* So marriage doesn’t only have something to do with the spouse, it has most of all, to do with God. It was instituted by Him. It is a gift. He sees it as being so holy, that He uses it to compare His own relationship with His people. For this reason the Apostle Paul uses marriage as a comparison for the relationship Christ has with His church. He writes, *“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ...”* (Ephesians 5:25).

The comparison between the covenant we have in marriage and the covenant we have with God can already be found in the Old Testament. In Proverbs 2 verses 11-17 we read, *“Discretion will protect you ..., from the wayward wife ..., who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God.”* So whoever breaks the covenant of marriage, it is evident that that person breaks his covenant with God.

I want to return once again to the section I mentioned already in Ephesians 5. This chapter explains the relationship between man and wife. To be precise, it should be same as the relationship between Christ and His church. In verses 21-22 we read, *“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to our husbands as to the Lord.”* Evidently, God compares the relationship of His people to their Lord, with the bond between spouses.

Dropping down to verses 25 and 28 of Ephesians chapter 5 (KJV), we read, *“Husbands, love your wives,”* – and how? Here is the description of the bond – *“even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.”*

This last sentence carries with it an appeal, and that is to make an effort to love yourself. We won’t find another admonition like this anywhere else in the Bible. For the foun-

dational teaching says, “*After all, no-one ever hated his own body*” (Ephesians 5:29).

So it is evident that the love of our own selves is something that is a part of our nature. We often hear these days: “You’ve got to first learn to love yourself, because only then can you love others.” To my mind, this line of thinking is a sort of modern psycho flowery talk, but it is definitely not a Biblical truth. What Paul intends to point out to us here, is that the natural love that the man has for himself should also comprise the love he has for his wife, because she has become his very own flesh, they’re one. The complete section here states, “*After all, no-one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh*” (Ephesians 5:29-31). And now the Apostle summarizes things in verse 32, “*This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the Church.*” This is how holy God sees marriage! That’s why one can say: **Adultery isn’t a breach of the words you spoke, nor is it a breach of contract. It is a breach of covenant with God!**

Let me quote another passage of Scripture that underscores this truth. It can be found in Malachi 2:14-16, and quotes, “*You ask, ‘Why?’ It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the LORD made them one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. ‘I hate divorce,’ says the LORD God of Israel, ‘and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,’ says the LORD Almighty.*”

Jesus too, had this to say in Matthew 19:6: *“Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”* So Jesus attributes marriage to an act of God. I am aware of the fact that it is difficult for us humans to grasp this truth with our limited power of logical reasoning. Can it be that it is God’s will that a marriage is established between a believer and a non-believer? After all they have disobediently entered such a marriage, maybe even after having divorced!

We have often, already addressed God’s marvelous ability to see into the future concerning the sinful behavior of people. Well, when you as a Christian married your wife in disobedience, it was a sinful act nevertheless. I’ll never be able to explain why Jesus can say, *“What God has joined together, let man not separate”*, but Jesus stands by His word anyhow, which we could paraphrase like this: “Marriage should be primarily seen this way: It was instituted by God, independent of what principle people have for marrying – it should not be annulled.”

Could we thus deduct from this that we don’t have to heed any Scriptural instructions anymore when people get married, seeing that God is always the One Who puts people together? Certainly not! Whoever gets married in disobedience is not permitted to get divorced; nevertheless, his or her behavior is nothing else but disobedience and rebellion against God. One needs to repent quickly! So, once again: Marriage is the highest covenant between people. It ought not to be broken.

The Biblical commitment of marriage

What does the Bible have to say about how people got married? There are a number of requirements that the Bible has for a marriage that carries a legal force of law. The first of those was always the **engagement** (Exodus 22:15; Deuteronomy 20:7; Deuteronomy 28:30). In those days, as opposed to the customs we have today, the engagement was

much more important than the marriage ceremony itself. This was so because those who were betrothed to be married, made pledges of carrying out their marriage and also made vows to commit themselves to no-one else. You'll find this in Deuteronomy 22:23-27. Their commitment was sealed with the price that was paid for the bride; the Hebrew word for it was 'mohar' (Genesis 34:12; Exodus 22:15-16; 1 Samuel 18:25; cf. 2 Samuel 3:14). We can see then, that the covenant was already established at the time of the engagement, and so that occasion became the decisive one.

The wedding ceremony itself became the celebration of **bringing home the bride**. In Deuteronomy 20:7, we find an example for this: "*Has anyone become pledged to a woman and not married her? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else marry her.*" So a man who was engaged to be married was not allowed to go to war, because there was a risk that he would be slain in battle. The groom was given the opportunity to fulfill his promise and bring home his bride to be with him.

A beautiful and fairly elaborate example concerning the fulfillment of the marriage covenant can be also found in the Book of Ruth (especially Ruth 4:9-11). There are a few vital points that can be clearly seen here: 1. The vow was publicly made – before the "elders" of the city. 2. Both persons made the vow, the "elders" were only there as witnesses, but were not the ones to initiate the procedure. 3. Between the time that the couple made their vows, and the time the bride was brought home, there might be only a short time span.

Hence we can note that the engagement ceremony had great meaning in God's eyes. According to the Law of Moses, it wasn't only the person who had committed adultery that should die, but everyone who had broken the vows they made when they became betrothed. We come across

this in the passage we already mentioned in Deuteronomy 22:23-27. An engaged lady was to be stoned³⁶ in just the same way an adulteress would be if she had, of her own free will, slept with another man. The law made an exception only in the case of her being raped in an obscure place, where no-one could have heard her cries for help.

So we are safe in saying that the Bible makes it perfectly clear that the engagement is to be seen as the occasion in which the binding commitment is enacted. The word engagement signifies a pledge to marry someone. A pledge is a solemn promise, and a solemn promise carried as much weight as taking an oath. You may recall that swearing falsely has severe consequences in the Ten Commandments. An engaged couple was thus bound to each other, and no longer free.

When we reflect on this, it is also crucial to recognize that God also made a covenant with the following words: *“I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD”* (Hosea 2:19-20).

If no-one acknowledges how binding an engagement was in those days, and instead ascribes a modern-day meaning to it, that person could assume that God only made a vague and unbinding promise to His children in these verses. But He isn't a God who commits Himself to a 'trial-and-error relationship' with us – one that can be annulled at any convenient time, if we have other thoughts about it. The engagement gave the future-husband all rights to marriage, and at the same time brought him the responsibility of car-

³⁶ Usually, the rightful punishment called for making restitution (cf. e.g. Leviticus 24:18). Things were different, however, in the case of murder: Here, restitution or any kind of ransom was explicitly ruled out, making the death penalty the only possible requirement to fulfill the law (Numbers 35:31).

rying all marital obligations. This was so, even when the marriage in the form of the wedding ceremony itself had not been consummated as yet and the bringing home of the bride had not yet occurred.

Another essential and very interesting aspect was that the bridegroom was already expected to pay **the price for the bride** at the engagement ceremony. This was mostly paid to the father of the bride who didn't keep that money for himself but gave it to his daughter as a dowry, as we know is sometimes practiced in modern times (cf. Genesis 24:53; Genesis 29:24-29; Joshua 15:18 ff; Judges 1:14ff). This sum was not just a small sum, no, it was an enormous amount and was for socially securing her in case her husband ever got the idea that he wanted to leave the marriage at any time.

Some people assume that the Old Testament was legalistic and brutal, even to the point of putting women down. Do such views have any Biblical basis? Not at all. Please bear in mind that (amongst others) the regulations God made pertaining to the engagement, were meant to financially secure a woman. So we should make peace with the Old Testament, especially in light of the fact that the New Testament has its basis in the Old covenant.

If people had always adhered to God's ordinances, there would have never been an occasion in which women would be exploited as we have seen it happening for hundreds of years now. Even in our days it would be an advantage if couples wouldn't decide to have it out in court first. What a difference it would make if the future-wife would have an arrangement in place at the time of her wedding, guaranteeing her financial security should they separate one day.

So during the time of the Bible a woman was not seen as a creature without rights. Quite the opposite was the case! God's regulations were made so that she could be protected socially and legally. We'd have to look long and hard for

any such regulations these days. Amongst others, this regard for a woman is also mirrored in what Proverbs chapter 31 had to say. There she is described as being a clever and industrious business woman. On top of that she is seen as a person who displays vigor and one who has a wealth of ideas in her household. In this way she was a great blessing for her family.

The actual bond between a man and a woman was established at the point they became engaged then. So it was evident that the fiancée was also deemed a man's wife, even though she had not been brought home nor married yet. We can read about Mary and Joseph, in Matthew 1:18-20 for example. It says, "...: *His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.'*"

When God says that He is engaged to us until eternity, it expresses how absolutely strong, safe, and binding the nature of this promise is. So as born-again Christians, we can be glad that we have found a bridegroom in Jesus – a bridegroom who will bring His bride, the Church, home! He has irrevocably given this promise to us, and He will keep his vow and bring it to pass. In heaven we will then celebrate the wedding feast of the Lamb.

We can therefore join in and shout along with Revelation 19:7-9, saying, "*Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.*" (*Fine lined stands for the righteous*

acts of the saints.) ... “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!”

How glorious it is indeed, that we are privileged to be the bride of Jesus, for whom He has given everything! He has even paid the price for the bride with His own blood. So let us faithfully follow Him while we are yet pledged to Him, until he brings us home to Himself. May God’s grace be with you.

The Seventh Commandment: You shall not commit adultery II³⁷

“You shall not commit adultery.” (Exodus 20:14)

What is adultery? Why is it forbidden?

The first question that arises when we read this Commandment is this: When do you actually commit adultery? In essence, the answer is: It happens when someone has sexual intercourse with someone other than that person's spouse. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus went as far as saying that adultery is committed even when a person looks at another lustfully. Note that even though this takes place in the mind, it is adultery (Matthew 5:28).

Let us now turn to the immediate follow-up question. Why is adultery forbidden? The reason is: Because marriage is a covenant before God and man. It is one that must not be broken. God establishes with it blood relatives that are closer than any other relatives and it should be kept holy. The partners in marriage should remain faithful to each other just as God remains faithful in His covenant to us. *“‘Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,’ says the LORD, who has compassion on you” (Isaiah 54:10).* God's eternal covenant with His children is the model for the covenant of marriage (cf. Ephesians 5:25; Proverbs 2:17).

Another reason is given by Jesus as to why adultery is forbidden. He makes reference to the order in which things were created: *“So they are no longer two, but one”*, which means closest relations. *“Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate” (Matthew 19:6).* With this we now arrive at the burning topic of divorce.

³⁷ Sermon, delivered on January 17, 1999

We now want to discuss divorce, re-marriage and sex before marriage, as the Bible sees it.

Divorce

In the Old Testament, we see the following verses amongst others: *“If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance”* (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). In this example the woman may not return to her first husband after she has married another. This is also what Jeremiah confirmed in Chapter 3 and verse 1: “If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him and marries another man, should he return to her again? Would not the land be completely defiled? But you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers – would you now return to me?”

What reason does God have for not wanting the woman to return to her first husband? It’s just that if that happens, it would be **incest**. She’s still her husband’s blood-relative even though she’s not his wife anymore. It would be as though she would marry her brother.

Why then, should the man separate himself from his wife and give her a certificate of divorce? We have read the answer –“because he finds something indecent about her.” Some teachers of the Law understood the term “indecent” to mean the most trivial of things. By doing this, they caused degeneration in the interpretation of the certificate of divorce as given by Moses. They have made it an act that

can be done for the simplest reason. A man could find any far-fetched reason to get rid of his wife. Even a pot of soup that had been burnt was an excuse. Other reasons included a childless marriage or even sickness.

Jesus took the time to un-do the twisting of the laws that the Pharisees had brought about – especially in Matthew 19:1-11. He explained that it could already be seen in creation that God didn't intend to have divorce (verses 4-6). In responding to the objections the Pharisees raised, when they claimed that Moses offered the possibility of a certificate of divorce, Jesus responded somewhat like this: "Moses permitted that only due to the "hard-heartedness" of the people." That means, unfortunately there were cases when spouses fought each other so much that they tore their marriages apart. It wasn't that Moses gave them a law as such. Rather, he had to bring a rule into existence, which took the form of a certificate of divorce. This step was taken so that their separation could be documented in an orderly fashion.

The man who carried a burning anger against his wife could no longer simply chase her away. He had to cool off first and begin the process of procuring a certificate of divorce. What's more, in many cases, because the man couldn't write he was forced to order a third party to do it. Moses did this so he could avoid any spur-of-the-moment, arbitrary acts of divorce. With this they could circumvent the threat that the certificate of divorce would become an invitation to separate. Instead it was a rather complicated matter. That's why the Pharisees needed serious correction, which Jesus did. They had seen the certificate of divorce as an alluring thing so that couples could split up easily (verses 7-8).

Then in the verse that comes afterwards, Jesus explains a foundational principle of how things should be rightly seen from God's point of view and from the perspective of the Law. It reads, "*And I say unto you, whosoever shall put*

away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery; and whosoever marrieth her who is put away doth commit adultery” (Matthew 19:9 KJV).

Remarriage

What did it mean when it said, “*whosoever marrieth her who is put away doth commit adultery*”? Many think that nobody may marry the pitiful woman anymore. In my opinion Jesus meant to say the following: When two people allow themselves to divorce because of general banal strife, and don’t remarry anyone else, therefore ending up committing a sexual sin, both parties should not remarry.

I also want to add that Jesus meant to eliminate the one-sided view of the Pharisees who had established the rule to the advantage of the husband. We can plainly see this in Mark 10:11-12: “*He answered, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.’*” So in principle, what’s meant for the woman is also meant for the man.

Paul also supports this understanding that spouses shouldn’t remarry when none of them have committed adultery. He writes, “*To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, **she must remain unmarried** or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife” (1Corinthians 6:10-11).*

If adultery or a sexual sin has not taken place, then according to the Bible the only possibilities that exist are either being reconciled to your husband, or staying single. Why is Jesus Himself as well as Paul so strict when it comes to this? The answer is simple: The marriage still exists before God if adultery and prostitution was not involved. The document of divorce might have been necessary before the official authorities and people, but before

God the marriage remains a binding force unless one of the spouses has had sexual relations with a third person.

In such cases, the innocent party is free to remarry. Why? When somebody committed adultery, that person was to be put to death. This could only happen when the person who had been cheated on brought it to light before a court. Otherwise the price could be paid in the form of the money that was demanded for the atonement (Exodus 21:30). In the sight of the court that adulterer was seen as having been put to death.

In an example such as this, the woman – whose husband had committed adultery – was seen as a widow in God’s sight. The following would apply for her as Paul says in Romans 7:2-3, *“For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man.”* So we can infer that the “displeasing” or “indecent” thing Deuteronomy 24:1 speaks of is a sexual offence and the same as a person having sexual relations with a third person.

“But what about when my husband beats me half to death?” I’m convinced, along with many interpreters, that the perpetrators of capital crimes should be treated in like manner as those who, according to God’s Law, committed adultery. That was the penalty of death. A murderer was dead in God’s sight. That’s why I believe that a woman would have permission to be divorced from such a person, and also be able to remarry. That would take effect also in cases such as occultism, magic, rape (of one’s own daughter for instance), or homosexuality. Also when a man constantly takes his own wife by force; she doesn’t have to wait until he kills her. Instead she should report it to the au-

thorities. Above all, when it comes to such difficult questions, I want to request that that person takes the opportunity to have a talk with a pastor or Christian counselor in order to seek individual advice. The point is that it doesn't always have to come to divorce in such cases. It might be possible after such counseling, to continue with a marriage if a person repents and the covenant of marriage is renewed.

Paul has something to say about the **divorce of unbelieving spouses** in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. He states that the believing spouse should remain with the unbelieving partner as the concern about being unclean has no basis. This was a key statement for the believers back then, because they lived with the fear that they could become unclean on account of the unbelieving partner.

Paul explains that the believers would not become unclean, but rather the unbeliever would be "sanctified" by the believing spouse. Of course this doesn't imply that the unbeliever is saved. It simply means that because of the covenant relationship of the one partner with God, the other stands a good chance of becoming saved also. This indirect covenant with God is broken as soon as one gets divorced from the other.

Sexual relations before marriage

If two people have slept with each other without being married, if they were virgins, the penalty of death was not applicable. But they had to marry each other (Exodus 22:15; Deuteronomy 22:28-29). If they had slept with various partners, the result was that they committed adultery and prostitution, and the consequence for that was death.

Paul instructed, "*But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband*" (1 Corinthians 7:2). And: "*Now to the **unmarried** and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves,*

they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion” (1 Corinthians 7:8-9). So it is clearly pointed out here that if two people can’t control themselves they shouldn’t sleep with each other, but marry.

Joseph’s response was a model example for such a case. He was engaged to be married to Mary and with this he was obliged to marry her. Up to that point he had not yet slept with her, otherwise he wouldn’t have been so sure that Mary was not pregnant with his child.

We can read about this account in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5. It says, *“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; ...”* For Paul, what these verses are about is the dignity of the woman. If your fiancée or girl-friend is precious to you and you want to protect the dignity that she has before God, then woo her to yourself with honor and holiness; not in passion and lust.

We also know that a fruit of the spirit is self-control (Galatians 5:22). Christians who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit can live, accordingly, without a man or woman by the grace of God. This can happen if they’re no longer slaves to their impulses. This might seem an impossibility for people who are of the world, but Christians live in the healing and receiving of God’s strength. By this they can live a life of abstinence if they need to. This is not only possible for singles, but also for those who are married – as in the case of a partner who is gravely ill, even for many years.

Thanks be to God, we Christians do not have to make our sexual desires the maxim of our ethic and sexual behavior whether in the marriage or outside it. Instead, we live by the power of the Holy Spirit Who has changed us and has enabled us to master our inclinations, lusts and desires. When our hearts are really focused on God, He gives us the

strength to remain pure during the times we form friendships and become engaged. He also gives us the strength to remain loyal when we're married, whether we see good or bad times, until death parts us. Hallelujah!

Peter admonishes the men in a similar fashion: *“Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers”* (1 Peter 3:7). If we do not live in sexual purity inside or outside the marriage, our prayers are hindered. So if you want God to hear your prayers respect your wives and honor them, also in the area of sexuality.

Let us be faithful to our partners and to God, because He hates unfaithfulness and an adulterous way of behaving. The Bible has this to say, *“You ask, ‘Why?’ It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his, and why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. ‘I hate divorce,’ says the LORD God of Israel, ‘and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,’ says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith”* (Malachi 2:14-16).

May God help us, His children, to walk the path He has set for us, and to keep His Commandments with all our hearts, whether it be man or woman, old or young. If you realized that you have committed a great sin in this area, then you may go to God with a heart of sincerity; confess and repent of your sin. The Lord will forgive you and strengthen you by His spirit, so that you can live a life that pleases Him according to His will.

The Eighth Commandment: You shall not steal³⁸

“You shall not steal.”

(Exodus 20:15)

The Eighth Commandment principally forbids stealing. It does not just say: “You shall not steal from people”. It states quite generally: *“You shall not steal”*. Clearly, we are not to steal from God either.

The root of stealing: Dissatisfaction

The root of stealing lies in our dissatisfaction with what God allocated to us. We all know that based on our natural makeup, we all have different talents and gifts. While one of us possesses certain musical abilities, the other commands skills in craftwork. And yet, we can be happy about the way God wired us up for He made all of us well!

The same holds true for the material things of this world. Everything a person owns, he or she got from God’s hands. He is Lord of all. Things we call our own did not come to us by some kind of coincidence or mere chance. There are people, on the other hand, who honestly believe that it was by their own strength and labor that they acquired wealth and prosperity. Don’t they know that it was God Who empowered them to do so?

God allots both natural (and even spiritual) gifts and material possessions. If you want to observe the Eighth Commandment, you need to acknowledge the ways God ordained life on earth. On a personal level then, it leads to these questions: Do you agree that God is the One Who dispenses the things of this world according to His plan and purpose? Are you satisfied with the share God distributed to

³⁸ Sermon preached on February 14, 1999

you? Affirming these questions means you won't steal, but trust God to supply you with everything you need for life.

Stealing from people

What does “stealing” really mean? At first sight, it refers to robbing others of their goods. That can be done forcefully or in a more subtle way, e.g. by soft soaping, conning or embezzling, carried out in secrecy. Of course, more things can be stolen than just material things. What about ideas, inventions, patents and the like that somebody unlawfully makes his or her own? In these cases, the Eighth Commandment is violated as well.

The Bible knows of a scheme that is also very sly: Stealing hearts. Scripture tells us about Absalom who turned any Israelite away that came asking justice from his father David. Absalom simply informed the person that it was in vain; King David would not be willing to listen to his plea. He would then go on to make them believe things would greatly improve once he, Absalom, was to be put in the position of judge in Israel. The Bible describes Absalom's plotting like this: *“Absalom behaved in this way towards all the Israelites who came to the king asking for justice, and so he stole the hearts of the men of Israel” (2 Samuel 15:6)*. If you withhold loyalty, and employ trickery to earn the support of people who would otherwise have followed your leader, you are a thief also.

A modern-day application could be found in divorced couples where one parent talks badly about the other in front of their children and showers them with presents at the same time. That's how one parent tries his best to damage the kids' relationship to the other and to steal their hearts. Stealing hearts is a grave sin, as the example of Absalom makes plain to us. He died tragically. God does not tolerate stealing.

Stealing from God

Stealing is a sin. Its most extreme form is directed against God. How can that happen? It happens, for example, when we rob God of the honor that belongs to Him alone. There is a certain school of theology, which does just that, asserting the ultimate driver for salvation, is man's own will; it is thus perceived that God offers salvation but man secures it by his own free decision. The idea that salvation is based on God and man co-operating in some fruitful way is unbiblical because it divides the merits of salvation between God and man. That is nothing else but stealing from God. Please, bear in mind that it is God alone Who effects salvation; even our desire to be saved is from Him. In other words, salvation is of the Lord, from the very start up to the end of it. It is within this context that Paul asks us: *"Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded"* (Romans 3:27).

An example: Tithing

The prophet Malachi describes another way of stealing from God: *"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. 'But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' 'In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse – the whole nation of you – because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,' says the LORD Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the flood-gates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it'"* (Malachi 3:8-10).

If God's people do not tithe, they steal from God. Tithing was a fixed amount of provisions God ordained, unlike a voluntary donation. This part for God was to be set aside joyfully and to be given from the heart. Tithing applies to the days of the New Testament also, something the Bible explains with a couple of different reasons:

1.) Jesus Himself tells us: *"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's"* (Matthew 22:21). Jesus

contrasts an official state tax and a tax for God. We all know that the money Caesar demanded wasn't given on an 'as you like' basis. Why should the tax God requires be anything like alms then? The truth of the matter is that we ought to give God what is His and what belongs to Him – or else we wouldn't put it in the broader context of stealing here. The amount of money we owe God is not determined by us. We don't have any leeway here but are to tithe according to what He ordained; Jesus puts this very clearly in Matthew 23:23: *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former”*. Jesus does not preach that we should forget such petty things as giving a tenth of mint and cumin and concentrate on the crucial things instead. What He stresses is that we should do both. Obviously, He does not abolish tithing at all.

Frequently people feel indignant at God's demand for tithing. If one, however, compares the skyrocketing state taxes with the tenth the Lord wants, God's requirements look very very modest indeed. In the minds of numerous people, the Ten Commandments appear like a major infringement on their lives; they hardly ever factor in what the so-called democratic government imposes on them when it taxes them heavily. The average breadwinner in Germany has barely half of his pay packet left once he or she has paid off all the expenditures the government considers mandatory. A Christian brother put in writing what he had to say concerning this situation: “If today we lived in a theocracy³⁹ rooted in a divine constitution, tithing would cover everything”, in the way it used to be in ancient

³⁹ “Theocracy” = “government by God”. The term is derived from the Greek language: “theos” = “God” and “krateo” = “to rule, to govern”

Israel. He continued to say, “The additional state tax of our day is punishment for the fact that we don’t recognize God’s rules for our nation.”⁴⁰ For God once warned the people of Israel of a king who would have the audacity to tax people as much as God required. This is the particular Bible passage that renders what God said: *“He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the LORD will not answer you in that day”* (1 Samuel 8:15 + 17-18). We may conclude that God considered it an oppression to even take a ten percent state tax, and therefore, did not take it into consideration for His people, the Israelites. A tenth, however, the people were supposed to give in order to honor God. That would have been sufficient and would have guaranteed a blessing on their general welfare. As we can see, Jesus confirmed the teachings on tithing in the New Testament.

2.) A second reason why giving a tenth is to be kept is the tithing to Melchizedek. The Mosaic Law stipulated that the Levitical priests were entitled to receive the tithes of the people. Abraham, however, had already given that part to another priest called Melchizedek. Melchizedek represented an eternal priesthood after whose order the priesthood of Christ is fashioned.

Abraham set Lot free. The Bible goes on to say what happened next: *“Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.’”*

⁴⁰ Curtis Clair Ewing. *The Law of Tithing in Scripture*. Sierre Madre (CA), 1969. Page 9. Quoted as found in the (German) book by Thomas Schirmacher, called: *Ethik*. Vol. 2. Page 433

Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything” (Genesis 14:18-20).

If that was all the Bible had to say about it, a number of questions pertaining to tithing would remain open. In the book of Hebrews, however, the topic is dealt with again. Let us read together: *“This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the king and blessed him, and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, his name means ‘king of righteousness’; then also, ‘king of Salem’ means ‘king of peace’. Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest for ever. Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch gave him a tenth of the plunder! In the one case, the tenth is collected by men who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living” (7: 1-4+8).*

These verses clearly indicate that Abraham, father of all believers, gave a tenth to Christ, the priest Most High, in Melchizedek. Just like Melchizedek, Christ offers us bread and wine in His Holy Supper. Tithing was thus around way before the Law of Moses and stretches all the way to Melchizedek’s eternal priesthood. So if the father of all believers, who we are, acted accordingly and the book of Hebrews reiterates the idea, it becomes evident that tithing must be a divine principle. This principle is not only motivated by the Mosaic Law but by the very heart of God, given to His people – both of the Old and the New Testament.

3.) Another aspect concerns the provisions for the preachers. In Corinthians 9:13-14, it says: *“Don’t you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel”*. How does Paul arrive at this

conclusion of having the preachers live from the gospel? He draws on the same right the priests and Levites of the Old Testament enjoyed when they received a tenth; they got it to administer it. According to the Apostle Paul, the same should apply to the body of Christ.

4.) **Nowhere in the New Testament does it say that tithing was abolished.** Instead, early church history shows that tithing was a very common practice in the churches. Of course, the question needs to be addressed where that money should go.

Back then in the days of the Old Testament, the priests and Levites administered the tenth they received from the people. In the New Testament it is the church (represented by its pastors, elders, and deacons) that does so. This is how the Bible spells it out for us: *“Now, about the collection for God’s people: Do what I told the Galatian church to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made”* (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). Apparently, the offering was collected during the service, for the first day of the week was the day the church assembled (Acts 20:7). The amount of money was to be fixed in line with one’s earnings.

We can learn from this that the money that belongs to God needs to be given to the church. It cannot be dispensed just anywhere simply because we deem it more urgent to give it to some other cause, or because we feel that the church does not properly account for it or spends it on needs other than we see fit. Picture the following scenario. Everyone would stop paying taxes to the tax office and channel that money instead to purposes that might be more deserving of financial assistance, according to our own good judgment. What would we call such behavior? Tax evasion. Our analogy rings true for tithing as well. In the same way we pay taxes to the authorities, we are to give

God what belongs to Him. We cannot administer tithing in the way we see fit. Please, let us give to God what is His.

In the first church, there was no other authority than the church itself. Missionary endeavors that are independent of a church are foreign to the Bible. At our church in Hamburg, we have always followed this example. In practice, this means that our missionary work has always been under the control of the church so that all offerings are subject to the proper administration of our responsible brothers-in-Christ. It is the church that sends out missionaries and handles all financial affairs. When the missionary work is completed, the missionaries return to the church and are held accountable by the elders and pastors of our church.

It goes without saying that the church has the duty to utilize all monies collected for missionary purposes and social needs also and not just for its own requirements. If all believers stopped robbing God and truly gave Him what is His, the body of Christ wouldn't lack anything – neither with regards to its own needs nor for missionary work or the poor!

Did you know that the Bible even says that our entire income is not ours but just something that has been entrusted to us? Here on earth, we are mere stewards of what God gave us. Ultimately, everything we own belongs to God. In view of this, tithing seems to be the least we can give. Wealthy Christians frequently gave abundantly to the Lord; we are told that often they donated more than ninety percent of their profits to the kingdom of God because the ten percent they kept were still more than enough for practical living. **A born-again believer lives by the Holy Spirit, not the letter of the Law. That's why he or she is a cheerful giver.**

Nobody should be forced to give. This is something that should be done voluntarily. Whosoever loves Jesus and His Commandments will not want to steal from Him but give to

Him what belongs to Him. Such a person considers it a privilege to give to God because he or she is grateful to God. Don't we owe it all to Him?! And there is something else even, a wonderful promise for those who give to the kingdom of God: *“‘Test me in this,’ says the LORD Almighty, ‘and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it’”* (Malachi 3: 10). If you keep the divine Law, you will not experience harm but God's abundant blessings.

The Ninth Commandment: You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor⁴¹

*“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.”
(Exodus 20:16)*

We want to now focus on the Ninth Commandment in the series we’re dealing with on the Ten Commandments. What is this law all about?

False testimony in court

Understandably, that question deals with giving false testimony in court first of all. The emphasis here is on perjury. God hates it when people testify against each other falsely. They do this so that they can discredit others while they benefit from the situation. We addressed the question of perjury and swearing falsely when we looked at the Third Commandment. That law read as follows: *“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God ...” (Exodus 20:7)*. The Ninth Commandment isn’t only about giving false testimony in court. No, it is also about a general principle that is much more comprehensive just as it is with all the others, comprised in the Ten Commandments.

Character assassination

It is about character assassination. So it is about the good reputation of your neighbor. The Eighth Commandment was about protecting the belongings of your neighbor (*“You shall not steal.”*), the Sixth about protecting the body and life (*“You shall not kill.”*). In the Ninth Commandment, God wants to protect the reputation of my neighbor. We should consciously attempt to preserve the good reputa-

⁴¹ Sermon, delivered on February 21, 1999

tion of our fellow-men. We should not malign them by spreading false statements about them behind their backs. God Himself clearly comes to the defense of the good reputation of our neighbors in this Commandment. And He wants us to neither rob a person of his or her honor, nor to bring them damage. In actuality, it should be quite obvious, but we know that many sins are committed even in this area in the church. Often this happens without anyone meaning to, but now and then it is also deliberate. How often people have a tendency to listen to something that is said about someone, and then also to respond by saying something unfavorable about that person. It could be that you've had a negative experience with that person. What's more maybe he or she is not such a likable person anyway. Don't the following utterances sound just all too familiar to us?! "Just imagine!" or "Haven't you heard yet?" – And before you know it, the sin of the tongue has begun its terrible course.

Once, many years ago in our congregation, I made an appeal for people to donate to a particular mission's project. Shortly after that, I was invited to a conference in Canada. I decided to take my family along and foot the bill for the trip out of my own pocket. There was someone however, who could not imagine that *such* a young pastor with *such* a meager salary could afford to pay *such* a trip for five persons.

When we returned to Hamburg – Germany – we were already met by a very concerned brother. "Brother Wegert", he said, "is it really true?" I hadn't the slightest idea of what he was talking about. I responded, "What do you mean?" He replied, "They're saying in the church that you didn't mean to collect the donation for the Mission but rather so that you could finance your trip!" Looking back now I can chuckle about it, but still this malicious gossip was a big sin.

My last experience in this area is funnier, but goes to show also how rumor can make a mountain out of a mole-hill. I had to undergo minor surgery, and the doctor I was seeing advised me to take a six-week break between my operation and my next mission's trip. I must have mentioned this to someone in a telephone conversation, because a short while later a brother from the ARCHE congregation told me that he had heard from an acquaintance who lived very far away, that I would be incapable of carrying out my duties for the next six months! What was supposed to be a six weeks' rest, was now a case of being unfit for service!

God takes the sins of the tongue very seriously. In the Bible we read, "*The tongue has the power of life and death*" (Proverbs 18:21). Another passage says, "*The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit*" (Proverbs 15:4). In James almost a whole chapter is dedicated to this plight of mankind. He writes, amongst others, "... *no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison*" (James 3:8). And Jesus warned, "*But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of Judgment for every careless word they have spoken*" (Matthew 12:36). If we believe His words, we should alter our behavior very much. This is the reason the Psalmist had for pleading in his heart: "*Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips*" (Psalm 141:3).

Many Christians wish that the Holy Spirit could have more room in their lives. But the more we walk in the Spirit, the less there will be gossip among us. So a person can clearly define from the tendency a congregation has of gossiping, to what extent they dwell in the Spirit. When we're full of the Spirit and the love of God is strong in our hearts, we will love our neighbors as we love ourselves. And which of us would want to have others speak badly about us, slander us and tell lies about us? "*So in every-*

thing, do to others what you would have them do to you!” (Matthew 7:12). This is what Jesus demands us to do. One could also put it this way: Speak positively about other people and if someone says something bad about another person, ask him or her if the person they speak of has said so about themselves. If this isn't the case, then rather discontinue the conversation.

The meaning of this Commandment has yet a broader scope. It doesn't only mean that we should behave neutrally, and not report a bad word about another person, but also that we should actively pursue protecting that person's character by speaking good things about them. Not bearing false witness doesn't only mean discontinuing negative statements. It means rather, that we should actively seek to focus on the positive aspects about that person. Love is always active, it is never neutral. And as we know, keeping silence can also be a sin.

Sin is sin

But what about **when the brother has really sinned?** Should a person cover up the sinful act in such a case? The fact is that the Ninth Commandment, without doubt, speaks of the protection of one's neighbor against **false** witness. It didn't say: You shouldn't testify against your neighbor. It said you should not give false testimony. That means you should not tell a lie about him.

With this, does a person have the freedom to let the details of the specific sin of another person be known as he or she pleases? Jesus gives us good advice when He says, *“If your brother sins against you go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to lis-*

ten even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matthew 18:15-17).

So do not speak to others about the sins of your brother. Instead address him firstly. A person will shun this step often times, because that person won't dare to talk to someone about his or her wrongs and clearly reprimand that person in love. It is much easier to speak negatively about him behind his back instead. I once read the following phrase on the wall of a barber's salon: "If you are satisfied, tell others. If you're dissatisfied, tell me."

If you haven't got the strength to speak directly to your neighbor, don't speak to others about him either – at least not with the intention of gossiping and slandering him. If you sense that going to your brother alone is an overwhelming task for you, and the sin of what he has done is a burden to your heart, you may confide in the leaders of the church. After that you may confront the person who has sinned, along with one who has the authority to do so. Resolving the case within the church is always the right and honest one – the way of truth. *“These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other ...” (Zechariah 8:16).*

Untruths and lies

That is the reason why the Ninth Commandment deals with everything that has to do with untruths and lies. The sin of lying is one that, more than any other sin causes us to resemble the devil. Many think that the sins of the flesh, such as prostitution and adultery, especially resemble the devil. He certainly is glad when people fall into such sins, but we know that Satan wasn't created with flesh and blood. That's why the Bible didn't term him "father of prostitution", but "*father of lies*" (John 8:44). His nature is all about pride, spite, insincerity, and deceit.

For this reason, the Living God says in His word: *“The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are*

*truthful” (Proverbs 12:22). And the liar will come to his end: “But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and **all liars** – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulphur. This is the second death” (Revelation. 21:8).*

The account in the Bible about Ananias and Sapphira serves as a big warning too. We read, “*Then Peter said, ‘Ananias, how is it that Satan has filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal? **What made you think of doing such a thing?** You have not lied to men but to God’*” (Acts 5:3-4). Obviously, both of them had not even carried through what they intended to do before everyone, they hadn’t even told the lie. They had silently prepared this in their hearts. So they intended to cover it up without even saying a word.

There is a thing called flattery, which a person speaks, not intending to mean what is said. That is called hypocrisy. There are also lies that sound like truth when you listen to them, but which are meant to mislead those who hear. These are all a detestable to God.

Not too long ago, I read the menu at a restaurant. They offered quail soup, and the words written below in tiny letters were, “with beef”. A guest who ordered the soup expecting it to be prepared with the expensive meat of the little bird, discovered that the soup tasted of beef more than it tasted of quail. “What was the measure of beef, as opposed to quail, in the soup?” he asked the host. “One to one” was the answer. The guest could hardly believe this, and he asked him the question once again. He sulkily answered, “I already told you: One to one – the measurement is one quail to one cow!”

Have you ever said: “Why? I haven’t lied, I told the truth!” And nevertheless your truth was untrue, because you wanted to deceive someone whilst saying words that were true. Do not lie to yourself, and do not try to justify your words when you have done so. Instead admit that such an act is also a lie. The prophet Isaiah said this about the children of God: “*He said, ‘Surely they are my people, sons who will not be false to me’; and so he became their Savior*” (Isaiah 63:8).

We also know the words of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:25 which say, “*Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.*” Because we belong to Jesus and God has filled us with His Holy Spirit, we should also walk in the Spirit. Through the strength of the Spirit, we can put to death the works of the flesh.

So then, the driving factor within our hearts is the Holy Spirit, it is not our sinful tendencies any more. In the gospel of John it says, “*Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*” (John 8:32). In 2 Samuel 7:28 we read, “*O Sovereign LORD, you are God! Your words are trustworthy ...*” Jesus said this about Himself: “*Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life.’*” Christ IS the Truth. That’s why the Ninth Commandment that says, “*You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor*”, stems from His very nature, and mirrors His character. And just because His character is truthfulness, His Commandment could say nothing less. Everything that belongs to Him, that has received the seal of His Spirit and has become one with Him, discards lies.

While saying this, I want to stress once again that no-one can achieve eternal life by doing what the Commandments demand. Theoretically that might be possible, but the Bible explains to us that natural man could never keep the Law,

being dependent on his own power. *“As it is written: ‘There is no-one righteous, not even one’” (Romans 3:10).*

The Law could only be our taskmaster. In other words, it could only be our pedagogue that reveals our sins to us. It can only lead us to the grace that we find in Jesus and to forgiveness by His love. That’s why we must come to Him, and ask for His forgiveness. Are you still wrestling with telling the truth as a Christian? Have you still got a inclination to quickly let untruth slip through your lips? Do you willingly gossip about your neighbor? Then confess your sins to Jesus. He will forgive you and, by the power of His Spirit, will help you get rid of the tendency to lie, and to speak the truth instead. In Jesus’ name.

The Tenth Commandment: You shall not covet⁴²

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor". (Exodus 20:17)

A woman's worth

There are those that have criticized the Bible for, seemingly, making the house more important than the wife; after all, doesn't the Tenth Commandment talk about the house first, putting the wife into second position? It is my belief, however, that the term "house" is more of a collective noun really, referring to anything connected to it that we should not covet. The New Testament provides us with similar examples. What does "*household*" designate in Acts 18:8, for instance? "*Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord*". Surely, the Apostle isn't speaking of a house only that is made of stone or wood; instead, he has a family and all their servants in mind. The second part of the Tenth Commandment actually enumerates what a "house" comprises: "*You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor*". Here, however, the wife clearly appears first.

Please, don't overlook the fact that the Bible supplies us with the Ten Commandments one more time in the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 5 verses 6-21: "*You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbor's house or land, his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your*

⁴² Sermon preached February 28, 1999

neighbor” (v 21). As we can see, the Bible honors the woman; in no way does it hold her in low esteem.

Moving on then, let us find out what this Commandment is all about. Generally speaking, the Commandment does not concern itself with sins of deed but with those of thought.

Sins of sexual thoughts

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.” Coveting is a thought process; it does not involve the actual deed yet. Desiring your own wife is not forbidden – it is the way Creation is designed. Just like the fact that marriage is not forbidden but that adultery is, we can see here also that desiring your own wife is not forbidden but coveting someone else’s wife is.

Doesn’t that sound pretty much like the Sermon on the Mount already, where Jesus told us: *“Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart”* (Matthew 5:28). Time and again, people assert that Jesus replaced, even tightened, this “outer” Commandment of the Old Testament (*“Do not commit adultery.”*) by an “inner” Commandment, so-to-speak. This is not true. Jesus did not state anything new in the Sermon on the Mount. He merely confirmed what the Old Testament had already laid down. He refreshed our memory when He drew our attention to the fact that the Commandments did not only refer to sins of deed but very well included sins of thought also. The first nine Commandments primarily focus on sins of deed even though we need to bear in mind that they always include our inner motives and intentions also.

The Bible does not want to leave anybody in the dark about this, however. That’s why the Tenth Commandment does not close with a sin of deed but the sin of coveting and lustfully desiring. Evidently, that sin is a hidden sin of the heart. So when we read *“You shall not covet your*

neighbor's wife", this text is basically the same as the one that Jesus gave us when He said: "*Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully ...*" Anybody who believes that the New Testament is better or stronger than the Old Testament, errs. How much did Jesus Christ know and love the Old Testament! It was God's infallible Word that required no correction or improvement. He confirmed it. That's all. On top of that, the Sermon of the Mount serves to expose the twists and wiles of the Pharisees; they remained silent about the fact that sinful behavior can indeed start in a person's mind.

Adultery originates in your imagination; this is a fact that many passages in the Old Testament confirm. The Old Testament is actually no different from the New Testament in ascribing importance to a person's heart behavior. This is what we find in Job 31:1: "*I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl.*" Another part of Scripture underscores this point also: "*For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life, keeping you from the immoral woman, from the smooth tongue of the wayward wife. Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes*" (Proverbs 6:23-25). The Old Testament had a clear-cut view of what sexual desire for someone else's wife was all about: it was an act of stealing – stealing from your neighbor as well as stealing the woman's honor. Desiring a woman unlawfully is the worst type of robbery and stealing. We can see from this, how the Tenth and Eighth Commandment ("*You shall not steal.*") interface with one another.

Let me give you a few other passages of Scripture that talk about the sins of thought:

"In your heart you devise injustice, and your hands mete out violence on the earth" (Psalm 58:2).

"The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the

thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time” (Genesis 6:5). We can infer from this that the great flood did not only happen due to the sins of deed the people had committed but also on account of their sins of thought.

*“There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, **a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil” (Proverbs 6:16-18).***

*“Their feet rush into sin; they are swift to shed innocent blood. **Their thoughts are evil thoughts; ruin and destruction mark their ways” (Isaiah 59:7).***

*“O Jerusalem, wash the evil from your heart and be saved. **How long will you harbor wicked thoughts?” (Isaiah 4:14)***

In light of this, please let us no longer hold on to the idea that the Old Testament speaks of sins of deed (with a possible account for sins of word perhaps) only. Equally wrong is the notion that the Ten Commandments included outer actions only, while Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount supposedly took a deeper look at the subject when He brought our thoughts into the picture as well. No, ideas like that don't add up. The Old and the New Testament stand united and display but one message. The only difference there is between the two Testaments concerns the fact that salvation is enfolded more fully in the New Testament.

God is the same – yesterday, today, and forever more. It has always been a big sin before Him when people broke His Commandments in heart and thought. The Tenth Commandment does not speak of deeds and words but of the emotions in our heart. If they are evil, we trespass the law in the same way as someone who kills another person.

Envy

The Tenth Commandment has something to say about envy also. Envy isn't a sin of deed either in the first place but a sinful attitude of the heart and the root of all coveting. If someone lusts for something another person owns, he covets it because he envies the other person. I want to have what belongs to somebody else. If you aren't happy with what God in His wisdom and providence allotted to you, you will begin coveting what the other person has. The Bible puts envy in the category of the carnal; therefore, people who live by the Spirit will find envy foreign to their thinking.

“The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, ... jealousy, fits of rage, ... factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like, I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21).

“But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth” (James 3:14).

“Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind” (1 Peter 2:1).

“For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice” (James 3:16).

It is a fact that where envy abounds, evil things take place. Perhaps I could illustrate my point with the following little story⁴³. Once there was a monk who was on a hike. As he was walking, two other men caught up with him. One of them was terribly greedy, the other a very envious person. It didn't take the monk too long to find out what kind of

⁴³ Paul Lee Tan. Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times. Assurance Publishers: Rockville, 1979¹, 1988 (10th Printing). Number 915

negative qualities the guys possessed. So, when the two men were about to part company with him again, the monk said: "I'd like to give you a farewell present. You may come up with a wish. The one who gives me his request first will be granted whatever he desires right away. The other person won't have to wish for anything anymore; he will automatically receive a double portion of what the first one had asked for." So what do you think, who voiced his desire first? The greedy or the envious person? None of them, for the simple reason that each one wanted to get the double share of the other one!

It took a little while but eventually, the greedy person wanted to choke the envious one, crying out: "I'm going to kill you if you don't make your wish right now!" The envious did not want the other guy to feast on the lion share; yet he was faced with a severe threat to his life. So he had no alternative but to give in, blasting out: "I wish for a blind eye." Within an instant, his desire was fulfilled. The greedy one got his 'blessing' as well: Two blind eyes! That's how far their envy and greed had led them. Surely, where there is envy, there is a lot of wickedness also.

Leo Tolstoy tells the following story: A slave was set free by his kind master, and was given much land as his own, in fact as much as he could walk through from sunrise to sunset. At the first light of dawn the slave set out, not taking a minute to rest. Piece by piece he claimed it for future ownership. The sun made its way toward the west and he hastened his pace. By doing this he meant to ensure that the forest over yonder and the plot over there would be secured as his own. At sunset he returned to where he had started. With a feeling of elation inside him, he proclaimed, "This is now, all mine!" Then he collapsed from a heart failure and died. Tolstoy concludes the story by saying: "How small that piece of land is that a man needs. One meter, times two meters or even smaller is all that a grave requires."

But wherever the Tenth Commandment is cherished, peace and well-being will follow, because it says, “*You shall not covet!*” A Christian told me about the way he deals with covetousness and feelings of jealousy. He himself only lived in a modest apartment, he owned a small, rusty car, and had a small income. On top of all this he wasn’t healthy either. So he really had all the reasons to be covetous of other Christians who were better off. However, when episodes of covetousness threatened to engulf him, the words “*You shall not covet!*” would come to mind, and the feelings he struggled with, would just dissipate. By God’s grace, he had decided: “Covetousness is out of the question for me.”

Keep the heart and thoughts clean

The Tenth Commandment means to also say to us: Keep your heart and thoughts clean. The last Commandment earnestly addresses the sin in our inner beings. God intends to, very earnestly, also be Lord of the hidden areas of our lives which comprise the desires we have. He has demands concerning our most inner thoughts and fantasies that no other earthly law-giver could have. Just try to imagine a judge in court, sentencing a person to one year in jail just because, in his mind, he coveted his neighbor for his piece of land. No court could do that. God, however, “*judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart*” (Hebrews 4:12). Your thoughts aren’t without penalty with Him. “*Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart*” (1 Samuel 16:7).

It is therefore, of no use if a person only pays attention to keeping this Commandment on the outside, in other words, superficially. Christians should make an earnest effort to keep their hearts clean before God. Of what use is it, if we wash the outside of the container, but the inside remains full of impure desires. So please let us also be very con-

cerned about the sins of our hearts, and pray just as David did: *“Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults” (Psalm 19:12).*

The Tenth Commandment is really the icing on the top concerning all Ten Commandments. If we thought that we could have kept all the Commandments up to this point – even though it is impossible to do so – we would have to capitulate when we encounter this one, and confess our transgressions. Which person can remain righteous, when his or her thoughts are laid out on God’s table of judgment and we have to answer for them?

It is not per chance that the last Commandment happens to address the sins of the heart, because every sin that we do in word and deed has its source in the inner uncleanness of the soul.

Not one theft happens without the heart being covetous and evil before it is perpetrated. No adultery occurs without the heart having given itself over to sinful lust. *“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matthew 15:19).* So Jesus intended to say that the conductor of these gruesome sinful deeds is the sinful thoughts, since the source of sins is always the human heart.

So start fighting sin already at the roots, and what’s more in your hearts, your thoughts, and your motives. You may say something like: “But I can’t defend myself against thoughts that just come into my mind.” Someone once gave the following interpretation as an answer: You might not be able to stop the thoughts in your mind from flying around like a bird over-head, but you can prevent them building a nest on your head and making their home in it.

However, we don’t want to forget that no person can keep the Commandments, least of all the Tenth one, depending on his or her own strength. That’s why the Bible

also states, “*The weapons we fight with are **not** the weapons **of the world**. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strong-holds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we **take captive every thought** to make it obedient to Christ*” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

If we keep this last Commandment in view, we must, at least by now, be able to recognize our own sinfulness. Every idea we might entertain, that we can keep the laws in our own strength will falter at this point of looking at the Ten Commandments. By this time it will be clear to us how absolutely absurd it sounds. God’s laws are there to make it obvious to us how hopeless we are, so that we can turn to Christ, humbly repent and receive forgiveness through His blood. That’s when the laws will also show us how to live a fulfilling life to the glory of God, by the strength of the Holy Spirit. May God bless us with the gift to do this.