

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"The Controversial Side of Jesus"
Dr. J. Dent

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Third Sunday in Lent

Most of us know that there is a controversial side to Jesus. We know he upset the apple cart of his day. He allowed the Christian faith to become a mixture of mystery, practical truths, difficult conundrums and simple trust in God.

He knows that the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 1 turned the philosophers' and the educated ones' heads when he said the faith isn't about how bright you are or how popular you are. It is the message of the foolishness of being tortured to death on a cross to bring relationship with God. I've spoken on this many times in the past years. We know this is controversial and that not everyone believes in the power of the cross or even in the importance of Jesus.

We can only imagine what it was like on that day in the Temple where he overturned the furniture, knocked over the places where the sacrificial animals were being sold, where you could buy offerings for the day whether it be grain, wine, vegetable or meat. And Jesus overturned the places of money exchange, because apparently there was a certain kind of money in the Temple, and all other currencies had to be exchanged for this currency, the shekel, and there was a profit involved in that too.

So Jesus was upset. He saw the Temple that was supposed to be a place of worship, with a Mission to represent God to the world, God's love and law; Jesus saw that way being replaced with a making a quick buck. It was no small operation of disruption. It took him awhile to go throughout the Temple and overturn furniture. And of course, several were upset with Jesus, over his controversial act, and not just the businessmen. He was told he needed to do a miracle to prove that he had the right to do this kind of prophetic act. He said he would do a miracle, that if they killed him, he would come back to life in three days. But they didn't understand him. No one comes back from the dead. All the gospels have some form of this prediction of Jesus' death and its purpose. No matter how Jesus told either his disciples, or his detractors, or the crowd, none of them understood this.

So we give Jesus the right to be controversial. He throw the furniture around if he wants, or make controversial teachings. As a pastor, it is much harder for me to give exceedingly controversial teachings or actions. Pastors are supposed to be sensitive to the needs of the congregation. I try to be such, but don't always succeed. So when we come to controversial passages of Scripture, what am I to do? Often, to my own shame, I have in the past turned to other passages and done my best with them. But today I want to make some controversial remarks. I am making them, not because I want to stir you, but rather because I think they need to be said.

If you find yourself awkward, or in disagreement, I appreciate your willingness to hold that thought and either make an appointment with me or try to talk with me through text or email or phone or whatever is available. My intent is to help us all with what the Scriptures say. My intent is not to hurt you and certainly not to harm you.

With that said, I want to look again at the Ten Commandments. Now you might now say, "How is it that the Ten Commandments are controversial?" But in a moment you will know that they are.

The Law draws us back to God and relationship with God. That's why Exodus 20 starts with the words: "And God spoke all these words." This is critical for how we start this study of the Bible and every Bible study. This is not mainly about how I read the Bible, but more an attempt to get you to engage with God over what God says. I will tell what I think. I will tell you plainly, simply, and clearly, if I can. These are the marks of a good teacher, from my point of view. But it is God who is speaking, God who is revealing God's will and point of view.

In the Ten Commandments, God starts with relationship with God. God wants the relationship with himself to be exclusive. God wants to be your God. There are many other competitors, who are not God, yet take the God slot, if you will. Some of these are hard to hear for those of us who believe we have no other gods, but in fact have addictions, or activities we cannot stop. Drug and alcohol addictions are common, but so are worry, food and workaholic addictions. We don't need a Norwegian to tell us we are overweight, even if we are. Some of us are consumerist and some of us have video and sexual addictions. There are many competitors with God who are not God. Religion itself competes with God's desire for relationship, but maybe we will get to that another week.

So that's the first couple of commandments, you shall have no other gods, and no idols. Then comes using the name of God and rest. We live in an age that has no problem with people saying "O my God" over and over again. When I first gave my life to Christ publicly in the '70s, I was always feeling awkward about the Lord's name, "Jesus Christ," because so many at school and my father used that name as an effective swearing device. So it took a long time to use that name as indeed the name it was meant to be used as. What is your practice? By the way, Gee, Geez, the use of damn with God's name and many other less affective swearing devices are common in our English usage. Ask God to help you break these habits.

Resting, that is taking a day off, is essential to human health, as determined by God. We take off Sunday, to honour the Resurrection. We need to worship and make worship a priority in our week. The Jews and the Seventh Day Adventists take Saturday. It is important to get the rest we need. It is also probably important to take time off as a culture, but that seems in N. America to be going in the 24/7 direction, rather than the direction of sanity.

The other six commandments are controversial because they deal with our relationship to one another. They are the basis of Western jurisprudence, but I am afraid this link will soon be lost.

Relationship to mother and father is problematic because we don't know who mother and father are any more and we place little importance on the role of the two sexes in family development. Respect for older people is all but gone. We no longer understand what family is, or have so redefined it that it can mean anything. I know it is hard to honour parents, even in the most traditional of settings. As we seek to do so, God blesses us.

Murder too is controversial. Generally speaking everyone is against murder. Except if the killing is in the first few weeks of life or in the last few. There's the controversy. How do we protect our most vulnerable members of society, those who have no voice, due to age, mental or physical condition? This is terribly controversial.

And adultery is based on the traditional understanding of marriage. That too is controversial, although it is clearly the only institution Jesus draws us to accept. Christians are divided on this subject. Our own denomination will be debating this question of marriage and human sexual ethics at the next

General Assembly. Meanwhile, the majority of the population do not even get married but are assigned that category by the government in the paying of taxes, after living together for a while. So while we could talk about adultery, we would need to understand marriage and sexual ethics first, which is super difficult these days. Because culturally, sexual right and wrong do not exist, it is all about and only about consent. And you know some of the debate on consent in the last year.

Theft is also about relationships to one another. It too has assumptions. It assumes private property and property rights of some kind. It assumes you know that you shouldn't take something that is not yours. But some argue that private property itself is an inappropriate institution. When I was in BC, I had some interesting conversations with a squatter, who felt that if someone was not in their house or shed or property for a while, that someone else should take it over. I also talked to someone who felt that asking for money on the boulevard was his calling. I have not talked to those doing this here.

The Ten Commandment teachings end with two other relationship challenges. The first is telling the truth or, conversely, not telling lies in giving evidence about someone else. Honesty is hard. For those of us who we hurt as children for telling the truth, we learned to do something else. We found the way of least resistance. Some of us learned how to make others laugh. Some of us stayed quiet. Some of us learned to lie at an early age, that is, to try and tell another person what we thought they wanted to hear. This is not recommended, but it is not rare.

Coveting is about wanting what others have. This has always been in human culture, right since Cain and Abel. Competitive consumption exists, wanting someone else's goodies, their car, their house, their money, their status, their power, their reputation, their education, their (you fill in the blank here) or indeed their spouse or friend or employee as our own.

Jesus did much more than I did in talking about the Ten Commandments in terms of where our hearts are in the Sermon on the Mount. As we talk to one another in these changing times, may God give us grace to hear each other and to want to trust God first.

Let us pray.

