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Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20  
Matthew 21: 33-46

## THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

It is true that where there is a duty, there is also a corresponding evil. A choice. I believe in the Military code of justice they call one breach of duty—dereliction of duty. Dereliction of duty to me means the entertaining of evil in my own life and the way in which it is so easy for the church to let the insidious nature of evil begin to control us.

Simply put, we are prone to ignore what is right and to do what is expedient—what is wrong. This is not because God's word is confusing. God is very clear in expressing what is expected. Both in the decalogue it's clear, and in Matthew's gospel today in the parable it's very clear. What is expected of those who are caring for the vineyard is to return to the owner what rightfully belongs to that owner. In the decalogue it's the same thing.

"I am the Lord your God. I brought you out of slavery. Out of oppression." And then, if I can paraphrase: Pay attention! Here is what I want from you. Worship only me. And worship me as I am, not as you would recreate me. Your recreations—your idols—are always a distortion of who I really am. Worship me and keep even the mention of my name sacred—holy. "Do not trivialize your worship of who I am," God says, "by being careless with how you call upon my authority."

Are we guilty of trivializing who God is in our conduct of worship? Are we guilty of extending the wrong, which God explicitly calls us to turn from when we manipulate who God loves—who God has come to be in our midst?

Those first three should be enough, shouldn't they? But God knows how prone we are at manipulation. And so He becomes very specific. "If you are going to worship me, set aside time. Let the Sabbath be for you what I always intended. And in keeping the Sabbath and in worshipping me, remember to honor your parents, and to hold life sacred. Remember to keep your hands off you neighbor's spouse. Remember to keep your hands off your neighbor's stuff. Tell the truth. Be a people of truth." And then, because God knows us so completely, and he knows how we think, he says, "In fact, keep your mind off other people's stuff." This is similar to a fairly humorous sign where I live which says, "Don't even think about parking here."

Number ten of the commandments says much about our struggle with evil. It's a really great progression. Just think about it. The eighth commandment says "don't touch." And the tenth commandment says "don't even think about touching." The parable and the decalogue. It could be pretty depressing stuff if we didn't acknowledge that we are

all prone to be derelict in our duty—or more accurately, to be treasonous, mutinous in our conduct of being faithful servants.

The chaos which our military fears and dreads is the evil that we play with—that we toy with when we become very familiar with not only God, but how we are going to practice our faith. When we hear our Sovereign speak, we know that just like Adam in the garden, we are defenseless. We are exposed.

Only God can be God. And only Jesus can bear the truth of who God is and who we are and how we are going to serve God. You see, when we seek to possess this wonderful spiritual freedom that God has granted us, in that same moment we still need to be absolutely dependent on God's grace and God's spirit.

I know that Jesus summed up the whole law in two commandments: Love God and love neighbor. But think what we would have done with those two commandments if we had not also been given the decalogue—the ten commandments. For you see, loving God and loving neighbor has specific form and shape. When we are at our best, in conforming to God's claim on our life, we are still little more than tenant laborers in a vineyard that does not belong to us. And when we think that somehow we can cheat God with our labor in that vineyard and with taking what belongs to God which is the very next breath that we take in—when we think somehow we can overrule God's authority, we do so at our peril.

It's interesting in Mark and Luke when Jesus tells this parable, he gives them the answer, but Matthew has Jesus let them answer. The pharisees seal their own fate. They are so quick to seek retribution. They do love to punish. And no sooner than their words of righteousness—their righteous indignation—are out of their mouths, they are convicted by their own practice of faith.

There's a parable about a zen master and a student. They're sharing a visit late in the afternoon. And they sit and talk and drink tea for hours until finally the teacher says to the student, "I think it's time you went home." The student goes to the door, opens it, and turns and explains, "It's completely dark outside." So the teacher lights a lantern and starts to hand it to the student saying, "Here, take this." And just as the student reaches out to take the lantern the teacher quick as a flash extinguishes the flame. And suddenly, the student knows everything that there is to know.

We are in possession of the light of Christ or more accurately, Christ is in possession of us. And when we think somehow that we have a right to manipulate the love and grace we have received, despite our best efforts—when we think somehow that we are capable on our own (how did the prayer say it? of muddling through our days on our own strength), we'd do well to remember that only God can guide our lives.

We cannot and we should not defy the meaning or God's truth and light by attempting to live it on our own strength. The problem of evil for us is that it's so easy. So easy. Even our thoughts, the decalogue says, put us at risk. And so our only hope is this table.

Where the light of God became flesh and blood and lived among us and claimed us—claimed us so that we might indeed work in God's kingdom, but always as tenants, never as proprietors, never as owners. This truth will help us. It will help us worship God by making an offering of who we are. Let us do that now and return to God everything we have been given.

Amen.