

This Week at the Creek

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the Church at Dyers Creek

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Here's the text from the pastor's Sunday message:

Live and Let Die

Exodus 20:13
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"Go ahead, make my day." I will confess to never having watched the 1983 Dirty Harry movie called "Sudden Impact," although I've heard its most famous line hundreds of times. In the opening scene – I'm told – this punk from a gang of young toughs is let off by a judge because Harry Callahan violated his rights. But Callahan keeps fighting back against the gang. He corners a would-be stick-up kid, who nonchalantly points a gun at a hostage and calls Callahan a turkey. Callahan thrusts a handgun that looks as though the barrel is a good foot-and-a-half long and growls these oft repeated words – even 24 years later – "Go ahead, make my day."

A bitter spirit even shows up in the songs that go with the cinematic productions. Paul McCartney sang "Live and Let Die" for a James Bond movie, describing the change of heart from one that loved life and living things to one that not only accepted death but promoted it: "When you were young and your heart was an open book, / You used to say live and let live. / But if this everchangin' world in which we live in / Makes you give in and cry, / Say live and let die."

We live in a live-and-let-die society, and we can't blame that on Harry Callahan or James Bond. It seems that a lot of people are constantly on the lookout for someone to offend their paranoid sense of propriety so that they can launch missiles of pent-up vengeance right back at their so-called enemies. Their finger is constantly on the button, ready to fire at the slightest provocation. Their hearts and souls may best be described as having itchy trigger fingers. They lie in wait of the situation when they can growl, "Go ahead, make my day."

Don't think for a minute that all the itchy trigger fingers are out in the world – that they haven't penetrated the church. Six years ago I read with

consternation this letter to the editor of the *Leaf Chronicle*: "I had planned to attend Wednesday night Bible Study at 7:00 p.m., when here comes the tornado warning (not watch) at 6:15. Even though the weather seemed calm, I did some quick thinking about taking some of my family members out into what might become dangerous. And also remembering the severity of the weather in time past, I decided for safety's sake that I should stay home, even though with all of my heart I wanted to go. Now if I could get my hands on the person responsible for this mix up, I would beat him or her badly all over with my shoe heel. But as the old TV series 'Maude' would say, "God will get you for this."

Is this the extent to which our Christian love has progressed? Is this the extent to which we believers put our **faith** and **hope** into action? Here's a Christian woman saying, "Your mistake kept me from going to Bible study; now I'd like to beat the fool out of you!" I'll conjecture that this woman doesn't realize just how desperately she does need to be at Bible study! She's more familiar with quotations from old sitcoms than she is with simple Bible verses like "Love thy neighbor."

What in the world has gotten into us? How can we harbor within our hearts such hatred and bitterness and vendetta and resentment and animosity and acrimony, and still consider ourselves Christians? I'm reminded of the piercingly defining words of the apostle John: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who **loves** has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not **love** does not know God, because God is **love**."

In this sixth commandment, the sanctity of human life is upheld by rejecting murder. Murder is not only against the victim but also against God, because each human being is made in the image of God. God has a great vested interest in the preservation of life. But when it comes to violence and killing, our culture seems to shrug and say, "That's just the way it is." We live in a society poised to fight, poised to blurt out, "Live and let die." It's an angry world. Killing has become passionless and cool with no accompanying sense of remorse. There are wars on innocent civilians, terrorist bombings, countless abortions, yet many take no offense. **Respect for God-given life seems to be waning on all fronts.**

Of course, you might be thinking, *I've never murdered anyone, so why am I wasting my time on this commandment?* But before you check out, take a look at Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. It seems that many in his day had read this commandment and had checked out on it too. But Jesus caught them – and us – up short when He said these words: "You're familiar with the command, 'Do not murder.' But I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother 'idiot!' and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell 'stupid!' at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill."

It strikes me that saying "idiot!" and "stupid!" to someone comes close to writing off that person altogether. What we're really saying is, "This person

doesn't even deserve to be alive. I don't want anything to do with this person. As far as I'm concerned, he's dead." That is murder in the heart. And that is where it all starts. People become so angry – filled with such hatred – that they kill. Some literally do kill people; but from Jesus we learn that killing really begins with how we feel and what we say. Murder begins with seeds of anger and hatred that we allow to take root in our hearts. And anger and hatred are murderous things; they distort our eyes and our countenances so that our very faces reflect death. Don't believe me? Then where did the phrase "If looks could kill" come from?

As with all the issues in our lives, Jesus deals with the root of this commandment – not just the fruit. He isn't content to trim off the poison ivy in our lives close to the ground; He wants to uproot the whole poisonous weed. And He tells us that the root of murder is anger – hateful, people-dishonoring anger. The Lord gets at the internal things. He gets at what's really happening in our hearts. And He knows that long before we would club anyone over the head, we begin the process with our thoughts and then take it even further with our words. Don't entertain any false notions here: Words do hurt; words can kill.

Words can devastate a person's life. They can wipe a smile off a face. They can take the sparkle out of an eye. They can steal hope out of a heart. They can sour a friendship of many years. They can cast a shadow over a beautiful day. They can quench those little sparks of fun and joy and laughter and tenderness that make life worth living.

Let me tell you about a lady – a strikingly beautiful lady – who went to her pastor for counseling. During the course of the appointment, she told him that she was having difficulty responding romantically to her husband because, she said, "I'm so unattractive." (The pastor was thinking to himself, *You've got to be kidding!*) Then she told this story.

As a teenager, acne covered her face. She had crooked teeth and wore Coke-bottle glasses. But an amazing thing happened. She turned fourteen and began to develop faster than other girls her age. One day she was on her way to school and the big man on campus saw her walking to class. She felt his eyes on her as she walked, and he spoke to one of his friends so that she could overhear him: "Woo-eee! Wouldja look at her!" he said. "Put a bag over her head and she'd be terrific!"

In time she outgrew the bad complexion. Braces straightened her teeth and contact lenses replaced the thick glasses. She became a beautiful young woman, and everyone knew it – everyone but her. The words that young man had so carelessly spoken had crushed her spirit and strangled any confidence or feelings of self-worth she might have begun to develop. So much so that 25 years later she couldn't respond to the affection of her husband and kept thinking, *All I really need to do to be attractive is wear a big bag over my head.* We really need to rephrase the old adage to say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can really hurt me."

This morning before I came to church, I went into the bathroom to brush my teeth – and an amazing thing happened. I squeezed the tube of toothpaste, and do you know what came out? Toothpaste! I kid you not! It wasn't mashed potatoes! It wasn't Jello! It wasn't scented topical muscle rub. Just cinnamony tooth paste! Toothpaste came out because toothpaste had been put in.

God knows that when I put Him first in my life, the first thing that will come out of my life when I'm squeezed – when I'm put under **pressure** – will be His **love**. When my life has been filled with the love and peace and long-suffering and patience and kindness of God, then when I'm squeezed by people or circumstances or challenges or troubles or problems, the Lord knows that out of my life and out of your life will come expressions of His love and grace.

In your life replace "Go ahead, make my day" with "Go ahead, make God's day." Replace "Live and let die" with "Live and let live." Replace anger with mercy. Replace malice with grace. Replace hatred with love. Replace murder with life.

Let us pray: Thank You, Lord, for continuing to change our hearts. We've asked for more of You, and so it is that we're seeing less of ourselves. Once our lives were filled with unforgiveness and anger, but less so now. You're producing in us the spirit of gentleness and goodness and meekness and self-control. We don't so much feel the need to do Your job anymore! We better trust You to administer justice and bring righteousness in Your own way and Your own time. Thank You for tempering wrath with mercy as You have done in our lives. Help us now to commit to valuing and protecting life – because You do. For we ask in Your Son's name.

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