

“Christ and the Tenth Commandment”

a sermon by

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Text: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife; male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor” (Exodus 20:17).

One of the legends to originate out of the history of rock and roll music is centered on Keith Richards, the lead guitarist for the Rolling Stones. According to this story, one night after a long bout with alcohol, drugs, and sex, the rock star finally fell into a restless sleep. During the early morning hours he awoke with a series of musical notes in his head. Though he later said he had no memory of this, he got up from his bed and wrote down the music that was in his head. The next day he awoke and saw the music he had written, but which he had no recollection of having written. When he played it on his guitar, it was a sound that perhaps is the most famous riff in the history of rock music. It became the prelude to the Rolling Stones’ smash hit, “I Can’t Get No Satisfaction.”

On almost any chart of the most popular songs in the fifty plus years of rock music that song is either at the top or close to it. But I don’t think it is just the driving beat or rousing sound

of that song that distinguishes it. There is something in the text of the song that has made it the national anthem of an entire generation. "I can't Get No Satisfaction."

I.

This morning we have read the words of the "Ten Commandments." In recent times the Ten Commandments have been a source of controversy in this country. The Supreme Court of the United States ruled recently about the proper place of the Ten Commandments in public places, particularly in light of the Constitution's prohibition against the establishment of religion.

The Ten Commandments have also been the source of some controversy in the Christian Church. Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer, took a very negative view of any kind of law, including the "Moral Law." Luther saw the law as a "bridle" and a "hammer." It was a bridle in the sense that it curbed the wicked and restrained them. It was, to use our word, a "deterrent." It helped to prevent evil-doing. Luther also saw the law as a "hammer" in the sense of breaking down all self-righteousness and reminding all of us that we have "all sinned and come short of the glory of God." For Luther the value of the law was that it drove people to Christ.

Others in the church have viewed the Ten Commandments in a more positive light. The writer of the Psalms 1 and 119 speaks of the "law of God" as a joy and a delight. The law is a blessing, perhaps the greatest of all.

Jesus also spoke of the law in positive terms. He affirmed that he had come not "to abolish the law" but to "fulfill it."

For that reason The Ten Commandments have always enjoyed a prominent place in the life of the Presbyterian Church. John Calvin identified them as part of the "Moral Law" of the Church and argued that they were still valid for the Christian community, even though the ceremonial and purification laws of the Old Testament were no longer binding on Christians. Calvin believed that the "Ten Commandments" were a guide for Christians and he often used them in the liturgy of the church after the confession of sin and the words of pardon. In the Heidelberg Catechism the Ten Commandments are included under the heading of "gratitude." They show us the proper way to express our thankfulness to God. Karl Barth once called them, "the other form of the gospel"

There has also been some disagreement over the terminology and the numbering of the commandments. In the Jewish tradition the Ten Commandments are called the "ten words." Some traditions also count the commandments in somewhat different fashion.

All faith traditions, however, see the Ten Commandments as falling into two distinct groups. Just as Moses brought two tablets from Mount Sinai, so we today recognize two major divisions in the commandments. The first grouping has to do with our relationship to God. The second has to do with our relationship to our fellow men and women.

II.

This morning I want to deal with the tenth commandment: “Thou shall not covet.” For many, this commandment is probably the least important. After all, of all the Ten Commandments, it is the only one that does not deal with external matters. It deals with matters of the heart. All of us understand the prohibition about murder, stealing, bearing false witness, and committing adultery. These are common sense laws and every organized and civil society in history has had similar laws. But covetousness--what is the big deal about this? It is what many of us would call a “victimless crime.” It is an interior attitude, not an outward act. But that is what makes it the most dangerous force we face.

That is something that Jesus understood quite clearly. Jesus was always more concerned about the inner qualities of a person than he was about their outer qualities. He understood that if the heart of a person were right, then the actions of that person would be right as well. But he also understood that if the inner heart of a person were evil, then evil would result.

That is why Jesus took the ancient commandments to a higher level. “It was said of old,” he pointed out, “Thou shall not kill,” but Jesus said, “Do not be filled with anger and contempt” (Matthew 5: 21ff.). And again, “You have heard it said, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ but I say, ‘Do not look after another person with lust’” (Matthew 5: 27ff). But Jesus did not have to deepen or internalize the tenth commandment. As the Larger Catechism says, “it deals with our ‘inward motions and affections.’”

So, how do we understand this most troubling commandment?

III.

For one thing, we ought to understand what it is not. The commandment does not forbid people to desire certain things. On one level the impulse for acquiring things is actually admirable. There is nothing wrong with people wanting to provide for themselves and for their family. There is nothing wrong with wanting to own a home or provide for one’s future. In fact, if the human desire of acquisitiveness were curtailed, it would be disastrous for our society.

That is not the thrust of this commandment. There is in this commandment a sevenfold guarding of the interests of another. It is not wrong to desire a husband or a wife. It is not wrong to desire to have persons to assist one in one’s life. No, the commandment is a prohibition of desiring those things that belong to someone else. That is the qualifying prohibition. It is not a command against desiring a house or a wife, but it is a prohibition about desiring what belongs to someone else: your neighbor’s house or wife, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

The commandment understands that covetousness is not simply an attitude. It generally takes a person beyond simply the desire for something to actually planning and scheming to get the thing desired.

In the Old Testament we read the story of King Ahab (I Kings 21) who owned palaces and property, but who wanted more. He wanted the vineyard of his neighbor, Naboth. In fact, the king offered to buy the vineyard from Naboth. But Naboth refused to sell the property to the king. Finally the King became so enraged that he had Naboth killed so that he could get the property.

But Naboth had not contended with the power of God or of his prophet Elijah. “Because you have done evil in the sight of the lord,” said Elijah, “I will consume you and your house.”

That is why covetousness is such a dangerous thing. It is seldom content to remain in the heart. It has a way of poisoning our lives until we are determined to get what we want--no matter the price.

Someone recently shared with me an article from the *Harvard Business Review* that addressed this issue. The article spoke of how much money people thought they needed to be satisfied. Those who had a million dollars believed that if they just had 2.5 million they would be satisfied. But those who were worth 2.5 million believed they needed 5 million and so on.

That is the nature of our society today. Gardner Taylor, an African-American preacher, who for a number of years was pastor of the Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn, once preached a sermon on the vision of the valley of the “dry bones” in Ezekiel 37. He described the situation in the United States as seen from the viewpoint of the black community: soaring unemployment, high rents, decaying buildings, streets, bridges, sidewalks, the lack of law enforcement, the lack of health care, the drug trade, a foreign policy that befriends military dictators and the oppressors of black people. “What is behind all this?” he asked. Then after a long pause, he rolled out one word like a peal of thunder: “Greed.”

IV.

The answer, of course, to the plague of covetousness and greed that infects every aspect of our lives is contentment. It is learning to be satisfied with what we have and not always consumed to have more and more. In Paul’s letter to the Church at Philippi the Apostle states this notion of contentment in a remarkable way: “I know how to be abased,” he writes, “and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4: 12-13).

The writer of I John observes that “perfect love casts out fear,” but perfect love also casts out something else, the desire to have what does not belong to us. When Jesus was asked to sum up the law, he did so by saying that the first commandment was, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul and might.” In many ways that commandment echoes the words of the first of the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other Gods before me.” The second great commandment, according to Jesus was the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves. That commandment is an echo of the Tenth Commandment. In fact, it is the key to the

second table of the law. If God frees us of covetousness and gives us contentment, we will have no need to neglect aging parents, to kill, to commit adultery, to steal, and to bear false witness.

This week's *Christian Century* features on its cover the smiling face of Joel Osteen who is a television evangelist and the author of the best selling book *Your Best Life Now: Seven Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*. In many ways there is nothing really new about the gospel of wealth and happiness that Osteen preaches. Norman Vincent Peale preached it. Robert Schuler preached it. Bruce Wilkinson's book *The Prayer of Jabez* echoed the same sentiment. Osteen believes that with a positive attitude and a lot of hard work, all things are possible for all of us, including a beautiful family and house.

But the vision of the New Testament is something more than the vision of wealth and happiness. It is rooted in God's love for us in Jesus Christ from which nothing can separate us, even death itself.

It is also rooted in the notion that there is a respect of self that does not lead us to those things that are low; a love of others that does not rob them of what is rightfully theirs; and a love of God that issues in a life of obedience.

If a person has these three things, that person is not likely to covet anything, for there will be nothing to desire that he or she does not possess.