

“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; or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”
(Exodus 20:17)**

Frank Rich, in last Sunday’s *New York Times*, wrote a piece he entitled “Awake and Sing!” in which he raised the question of “What, if anything, have we learned from this decade’s man-made economic disaster? It wasn’t just the trillions of dollars of wealth that went poof in the bubble. Certain American values also crumbed and vanished. Making quick killings by reckless gambling in the markets – rather than by investing in new products, innovations, technologies or services that might grow and benefit people – became the holy grail of the upper echelons of finance.”

One of the disturbing aspects of this recent crisis is the way it has affected the present political administration in Washington. We discovered, for example, that Lawrence Summers, the president’s chief economic adviser, made 5.2 million dollars in 2008 from a hedge fund, D.E. Shaw, for a one day a week job. Perhaps more troubling than that was the revelation that Summers had done consulting work for another hedge fund, Taconic Capital Advisors, from 2004-2006, while he was President of Harvard University. One might think that being the President of the wealthiest university in the United States might be a full time job in itself.

In the bubble decade, making money as an end in itself boomed as a calling among many elite schools such as Harvard, where in 2007, 58 percent of the men and 43 percent of the women graduates took jobs in the finance or consulting industries.

A very different note was sounded by Summers’ successor at Harvard in 2008 when the President of University implored members of the graduating class to “Find work you love,” reminding them that sometimes the “most remunerative job choice may not be the most meaningful and satisfying.”

This same note had been sounded a month earlier at Wesleyan University, where an aspiring politician by the name of Barack Obama spoke to a graduating class reminding them that “the big house and nice suits and all the other things that our money culture says you should buy, amount to a ‘poverty of ambition’” These were not idle words. Obama turned down a lucrative career path guaranteed to the first African American president of the Harvard Law Review to pursue the missions of service and teaching.

I.

This morning we are looking at one of the Ten Commandments, the tenth commandment that prohibits the coveting of the neighbor’s house, wife, man servant or maid servant, or anything else that belongs to someone else.

The Ten Commandments have a unique place in Judaism and in Christianity as well. They are often referred to as the Moral Law. There are two tablets: the first five refer to our relation to God. The second five refer to our relationships to other people.

There has never been a unanimous agreement concerning the numbering of the commandments. Roman Catholics and Lutherans divide the commandment against coveting into two commandments while other Protestant groups see this as one commandment.

II.

There is, however, something unique about this commandment. While the four commandments that precede it have to do with actions: not killing, not committing adultery, not stealing, and not bearing false witness, this commandment has to do with the internal world of thought and intent.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus spoke of a “new righteousness” that exceeded the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees. Jesus internalized the commandments. He not only prohibited killing, but anger as well. He not only spoke against adultery, but lust also.

But there was one commandment that Jesus did not have to internalize, and it was the tenth commandment, for the commandment against “coveting” is an internal commandment.

But covetousness is not confined to inward motions and affections. It has to do not only with desire for something that rightfully belongs to someone else, but also in planning and scheming to get it. The story of King Ahab in the Old Testament is a story of coveting. Ahab wanted a piece of land that belonged to Naboth, but Naboth would not sell it nor would he trade for it. When the wife of the King, Jezebel heard of this, she plotted to have Naboth killed so that her husband could have the land he wanted.

That is where coveting often leads. It leads to plotting to take what a person wants.

But of course, this is the real problem of coveting. It is a problem of the human heart. We may be able to control our anger so as not to kill. We may be able to control our impulses so as

not to steal. But how does a person keep from coveting? Only an inner transformation by God can bring about this.

III.

That is why this commandment has such an important position among the “ten words.” It is a fitting conclusion to the Ten Commandments, because in many ways it sums up all of the other commandments.

Covetousness is the enemy of personal peace. We cannot be quiet or serene if our hearts are eaten up with desire for things that are not ours.

Covetousness is the enemy of peace within the family. How many times have we seen families split up because of individuals who are jealous of other people? We want more money, a larger house, and more possessions.

Covetousness is the enemy of peace in our world. Developed nations need the resources of developing nations. The struggle for oil is a huge part of the instability of our world today. The writer of the Book of James said this long ago: “What causes wars, and what cause fights among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your member? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war.” (James 4:1-2)

Gardner Taylor, an African American pastor who for many years was the pastor of the Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn, once preached a sermon on the vision of dry bones that occurs in Ezekiel 37. He described the situation in the United States as seen from the viewpoint of urban blacks: soaring unemployment, high rents, decaying buildings, the lack of law enforcement, the unavailability of health care, and the disastrous effects of the drug trade. “What is behind all this,” he asked? That after a long pause he answered: “Greed.”

IV.

The antidote for “envy” and “greed,” of course, is contentment. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Philippi, pens one of the most thoughtful notions of grace and contentment, when he writes, “I know how to be abased, 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 in him who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:12-13)

The secret to Paul’s contentment came to him at the moment of his greatest separation from his God, his fellow man, and himself. On the road to Damascus he encountered the risen Christ. When the picture of Jesus as the Christ came to him, he found himself accepted in spite of his being rejected. And when he found that he was loved by God and accepted by God, he was able finally to accept himself and to be reconciled to other people.

Paul Tillich speaks of what he calls “being struck by God’s grace.” It often strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It often strikes us when we are walking in the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It is in these moments of darkness that we often experience God’s love, which tells us

that we are loved, even when we are unlovable; that we are accepted ,even when we feel unacceptable. That is what it means to be “struck” by grace.

This past week someone sent me a remarkable video that appeared on “YouTube” of a Scottish woman named Susan Boyle. She appeared on the British show “Britain Has Talent,” which is somewhat similar to a program in this country, “American Idol.” When this woman walked on the stage, there was a tittering of laughter in the audience. She was a very plain, slightly overweight, middle-aged person without a touch of glamour. But when she sang, “I Had a Dream” the audience was blown away by the beauty of her voice. Sometimes God grace is insidious. It comes to us in ways unexpected.

I wonder how many of us if asked, would say that we live contented lives. Many of us, I suspect, would say that we are close. “If only” we had a better job, a more satisfying marriage, a bigger house or car, a somewhat larger salary. *The Harvard Business Review* several years ago published a nationwide poll around the subject of personal wealth. The people who conducted the poll found out that most people thought they would be content, if only they had a little more. Those who were worth a million dollars felt like if only they had two million dollars, they would be satisfied. Those whose net worth was two million thought that if only they had five million, they would be content. And so it went.

John Woolman, the Quaker tailor in colonial times, learned the same secret that Paul learned. On one occasion he wrote in his *Journal* “My mind, through the power of truth, was in a good degree weaned from the desire of outward greatness, and I was learning to be content with real conveniences that were not costly, so that a way of life free from much entanglement appeared best for me, though the income might be small.”

But John Woolman’s life was not just driven by a desire for simplicity and contentment. It was also driven by another great passion, the abolition of slavery. It was his conviction that if the colonists would live simply and be content to live without covetousness, they would not need to buy slaves, cheat American natives out of their land, or maintain armies to fight wars.

John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, saw that there was an intimate connection between covetousness and love. If we love our neighbor, we will banish all thoughts to do those things that would cause our neighbor harm.

The commandment “Thou shall not covet” is closely linked to the commandment of Jesus “to love our neighbor as ourselves.”

As Christians, we live under the command of the Moral Law, “Thou shall not covet.” But as sinners, we acknowledge that none of us is able to fulfill that law.

That is why we need something that is far more powerful than the law. We need the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ for that alone is what gives us the power to free ourselves for the love of things to the love of people.

Amen!