

How 2 Equals 10: Jesus and the Ten Commandments

August 5, 2018

9th and 10th Words: *You shall not covet...* Exodus 20:17 and Luke 12:13-21

¹³ Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴ But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵ And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of covetousness; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” ¹⁶ Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷ And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

-Luke 12:13-21

Many years ago a major American company had trouble keeping employees working in their assembly plant in Panama. The laborers lived in a generally agrarian, barter economy, but the company paid them in cash. Since the average employee had more cash after a week’s work than they had ever seen, they would periodically quit working, satisfied with what they had made. What was the solution? Company executives gave all their employees a Sears catalog. No one quit then, because they all wanted the previously undreamed-of things they saw in that book.

The travesty of yearning for more seems to be the theme of our final Words from God in this series on the Ten Commandments. But in reality, it is not the yearning for more, a natural innate human spiritual quality. It is the yearning for more of that which never truly satisfies, fills or nourishes the soul.

As the Ten Commandments conclude, we move from talking about external actions – like killing or stealing or cheating or lying – to the internal state of our hearts. And while it may seem as though, compared to the outward actions of the previous commands, the thoughts and desires of our hearts hold lesser consequence, we know the truth. As go our thoughts, so go our lives. Martin Luther is said to have noted, “It is acceptable for a bird to land on your head, but you don’t have to let it build a nest!” Acknowledging that we don’t control our thoughts, we do choose which thoughts to linger over. This command not to covet invites us to push away thoughts that include desiring people or things that rightfully belong to someone else! That is the primary intent behind the command not to covet. But the fullness of these final words from God, I suspect, is that it points us back to the very start – the beginning – the first command: Have no other gods in front of you! When we let the desire of anything other than God take primary importance in our lives we have moved away from God’s will and hope for our lives – and we will suffer a life of “less-than” the abundant and full life in God.

The word for covet in Hebrew is Chamad. It originally had a lovely intent – to desire, and desiring is a good and human thing. What makes Chamad problematic is when it is directed at something already belonging to someone else – someone else’s spouse or dog or possession – desiring it to the point of obsessing over it and doing anything at all to have it! But that is not the only way coveting sneaks into our lives and works havoc with our souls. It can start with wanting what belongs to another. But just as loathsome is the desire of more and more and more that never says enough!

Jesus told the story of the Rich Fool, and let us first locate the story in time. A brother comes up to Jesus asking for help in settling his father’s estate. Immediately we know that the brother coming to Jesus is not the eldest brother, because that would be the brother doing the settling to begin with. In Jesus’ day, if there were just two brothers, the eldest brother would get 2/3 of the father’s estate and the younger 1/3. Should there be more than 2 sons, the eldest would get 1/2 and the others would divide equally the remainder. Jesus strictly refuses to get in the middle – as he did anytime he was invited to somehow get in the middle of a fray between two folks – Mary and Martha – Lord, Tell my Sister to help me in the kitchen, Martha says and Jesus says – not doing it!! Or

when the scribes and Pharisees brought the woman caught in adultery and wanted Jesus to decide her fate – and he refused, focusing instead on the sins of the scribes and Pharisees themselves. Jesus wasn't one to get sucked into the fracas!

Instead of arbitrating, Jesus warns the brother to be on guard against every kind of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. And he tells a story...the land of a rich man produced abundantly. The man has a problem. It is a kind of reverse problem – his crops produce too well! And so what do you do when you have more than you needs, well, you pull down your little barns and build bigger ones, of course!

And once he has stored enough for several years, he sits back and says to his SOUL: Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'

So far, there are two problems in this story as I see it: The first is response to abundance – it never crosses his mind to share what he that is extra...ME! ME! ME!!! Hoarding is a response to abundance, but not a useful one, right? Maybe you have the experience I do, you save stuff, thinking you may need it – one day --- when you drop six sizes...but the reality is that if you do, it won't be in style anymore and in the meantime somebody else could use it.

The other essential problem is he has confused his soul's needs with his physical needs. Food for the soul and food for the body are very different, right? Souls need relationships and kindness and hope and shared time – not just stuff.

But God has a word for this man: FOOL! He didn't get it that treasures in God were more important than treasures in barns...

Which brings us right back to the first commandment and the importance of our relationship with God. It is so easy to get absorbed in the Sears catalog – in looking for what we don't have that when we do our lives will somehow be better, happier, more content. And to all that God says: Love me first. Love me totally. Live your lives grounded in me...receiving my love and giving my love away to others.

So simple, and yet so difficult to consistently live our lives this way. It can take a whole lifetime to learn. May God's gracious Spirit empower us indeed to love God with all our hearts and souls and strength and mind – and love our neighbors as Christ has shown us love as well. Amen

Pastor Bobbie Blackburn
Trinity Lutheran Church
Bradenton, FL
www.TLCbradenton.com