

“How to Want What You Have”¹

Exodus 20:1-3, 17

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And God spoke all these words:

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

“You shall have no other gods before me.

“You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

The late comedian George Carlin once did a very irreverent skit about the Ten Commandments. As is true with most of Carlin's work, it is filled with expletives. I am only going to share the G-rated part. In the skit, George says there are way too many commandments, and he cuts them down to two, with some pretty incisive comments. Carlin's genius is that in some ways, he tells it like it is. He says what we have been thinking but were afraid to say out loud.

Today we consider two commandments, one that has to do with **idolatry** and the other that has to do with **coveting**. We consider these two because both are relevant to how we relate to material things.

First, idolatry. A very old fashioned word, rather out of style these days. Actually, the word is in common usage, but it has been turned into a good thing. American Idol (that's what every aspiring singer wants to be!). Teen idols (that's who the kids are swooning over). We idolize celebrities and our appetite for celebrity news is insatiable.

The Bible gives a different slant on idols. The Bible says idols are bad, even dangerous, something to be wary of. The Bible tells us God said, “You shall have no other gods (or idols) before me.”

Idolatry is worshipping or revering anything that is not God. Making gods of anything other than the one God. We rarely think of ourselves as being idolatrous (isn't that for the pagans? That was then, this is now?), but if idols include anything on our list that is more important than God, then most of us **are** idol worshippers.

¹ Inspired by the title of a book by Timothy Miller, “How to Want What You Have”

What occupies our time, our thoughts, our energy? Who, or what, are our 21st century 'gods'? They are many, I would argue. Power. Youth. Beauty. Accomplishment. Family. Money. Material things. Our 'stuff.' Billy Graham once said if you want to know where a person's priorities are, look at their checkbook. Look at the 'stuff' they are buying.

When things other than God consume us or distract us from the love of God and neighbor, they become idols.

Standing alone, none of these---power, money, family, things---are "bad". God intended all of this to be good. All are meant to be enjoyed as God's good gifts. Our God is a God who loves "stuff", else why would God have created so much of it? Stuff isn't bad. It's just bad when we love our stuff more than we love God.

Our stuff. We do love it. Americans now have more stuff than any other group of people in the world at any other time in history. Shopping is a *huge* recreational pastime. Huge. (It's the *only* recreational pastime for some people!) We spend enormous amounts of time and money finding stuff, storing stuff, organizing stuff, maintaining stuff, moving stuff, discarding stuff. The Internet and the Home Shopping network have made it possible to buy stuff 24 hours a day. And so we build bigger and bigger barns to store our stuff. The average size of the American home (now over 2300 square feet) is double what it was in 1950. And frankly there are many middle to upper middle class Americans who wouldn't *consider* living in a home this size.

What is driving all this idolatry? There are many possible answers to this question. Socio-political forces. Things like...technology. Advertising. Commercialism. The economy. Communication.

But there are other things, too, driving our idolatry. Human forces. Things like... spiritual emptiness. Confusion. Greed. Insecurity. Human nature. Covetousness.

To covet. Now, there's another archaic word for us. Right up there with idolatry. To covet is to strongly desire what belongs to another. I must make a comment here. The Bible talks about coveting your neighbor's wife or servant. This is because of the social location of the Biblical text---ancient patriarchy. Wives and servants were, in fact, property in that culture, and they are still considered property in some cultures today. Let's not get hung up on that. That's not where we are.

The list of what we covet today is, I would argue, about the same list as what we idolize: Power. Youth. Beauty. Accomplishment. Family. Money. Material things, especially material things of an expensive, exotic, or exclusive nature. *You know what I'm talkin' about.*

The Bible says coveting, like idolatry, is a sin. “A sin?” George Carlin would scoff. “You’ve got to be kidding! That’s just plain stupid!” he would say. “Coveting your neighbors’ goods is what keeps the economy going!”²

Carlin was a comedian, not a theologian. He also had a pretty big chip on his shoulder about God and religion. Yet in a lot of ways, Carlin speaks for the prevailing culture. There are many who say now (in this economy) all we need to do is get out there and keep shopping and all will be well.

In contrast, Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman believes that anxiety and self-reliance (which we talked about last week) combined with greed---wanting more and more “stuff”--- is the cause of our recent economic collapse. There certainly are many economists who are coming to the same conclusions. The theological question is how we might disconnect from this hopeless process, and how we might imagine and live into an alternative way in the world.³

That is the question. How can we step back from coveting what we do not have? How can we step back from giving too much importance to the things the world says we must have? The things that ultimately cannot last.

This is where our faith in God can really become the treasure God meant it to be.

I want you to take a trip in your imagination with me. I want you to imagine a world in which everyone has what they need. *Everyone*. Now right off the bat this imaginary trip has tripped us up because we bump up against that word, “need”.

To imagine a world in which everyone has what they need, it is absolutely necessary to differentiate “needs” from “wants”.

We have all seen the small child pulling at mom’s purse in Walmart: “But mommy, I NEED that toy!” “I NEED it!” The child whines louder and louder, until (more often than not) mom caves in.

What do we “need?” Let’s get basic here. Food. Clothing (but we don’t “need” very many clothes). Shelter (we definitely do not “need” 2300 square feet). Community (it doesn’t “need” to be a country club). Health care when we are sick (not the Mayo Clinic). Honest work could be on the list. Some means for exchanging goods and services (we do not “need” Swiss bank accounts). And let’s not forget we

² This last statement is an exact quote from George Carlin’s 10 commandments skit, as viewed on YouTube.

³ “From Anxiety and Greed to Milk and Honey”, Walter Brueggemann, Sojourners, February 2009.

need a purpose, a higher purpose, which we believe is God.

When you look at these basic needs, imagine that it might be possible for everyone in the world to have these needs met. The problem is one of distribution. We already know this about the world food crisis today. There is plenty of food for everyone on the planet; the problem is distribution.

The other problem is that those of us who not only have *all our needs* met, but most of our *wants* met, will have to stop acquiring more and more in order for there to be enough to go around. Not only for the world, but for our souls, we have to stop craving more and more, because the gap between *enough* and *more* is never filled.

How can we come to the place where we want what we have? How can we get to the place where we simply don't want more?

To be content with what we already have, we must realize that *all we have is a gift*. Our life, our health, our education, our work, all our material comforts, our families, our freedoms, our history. All gift.

To be content with what we already have, we must *live a life steeped in gratitude*. We have to thank God for every single thing in our life, even the challenges. Even, and especially, the simple, ordinary things.

To be content with what we already have, we must accept that *everything we have is fleeting* and will not last. Beauty, youth, strength, health, even life on earth all will end. We cannot capture, buy, or even maintain these gifts, despite what the Botox ads claim. It's a lie, and we do well to recognize it as such. We do the best we can with what we have, and we learn to accept each moment with God's grace.

To be content with what we already have, we must *resist the siren call of the culture*. The culture screams at us constantly, and all of us have to unplug from it. Don't buy into it. Turn off the television, shut off the computer, recycle the catalogues and the ads as soon as they come in from the mailbox (don't even look at them!). Give time each day to loving relationships, to building up others, to prayer and silence and love of God.

To be content with what we already have, we must *stop comparing ourselves with others* who have more. The news media makes it look like everyone lives the lives of the rich and famous, but we must recognize *this* for the lie that it is.

To be content with what we already have, we must *cultivate the habit of giving* to those who have less. This will open our eyes in gratitude for what have been given to us.

I am pretty convinced there is no way we can do these things on our own. We simply are too flawed, too weak, too self-centered. But God help us, we must try. For the sake of our souls, for the sake of hungering humanity, for the sake of the world, for God's sake. We must. Amen.

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