

“Getting Right With God”

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First Presbyterian Church
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New Testament Lesson: Matthew 22:34-40

Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 20:17

Remodeling your home, stocking a basement bar, travel, jewelry and, for you ladies, spa visits. Who wouldn't want all that?!? It's called "lavish living," or at least that's what the prosecutor calls it.

Irene Marie Brooner of Kansas City allegedly stole nearly \$2 million from her employer, to fund her lavish lifestyle as reported by the Star on July 1. The company, called Galvmet Inc., which processed steel and sheet metal was forced to shut down, costing its employees their livelihood.

Among the purchases detailed in the indictment were \$290,000 toward the home mortgage, more than \$81,000 on jewelry, \$97,000 on restaurants, nearly \$60,000 for spa visits and beauty items, and \$62,000 on travel.

What would cause someone to spend like that; I mean even at the expense of her own sense of integrity, her friendship with coworkers, and her family's happiness and security? What would cause that?!? One word: coveting – looking at others and wanting what they have.

We all do it. It's only human. But that doesn't make it right. And in fact, Brooner's story shows us just how wrong it is, and how dangerous. Coveting is so dangerous that God listed it as the final word in the Ten Commandments, "You shall not covet"

Coveting, as detailed in the Ten Commandments, is not about some vague desire, but rather an obsession that leads to action. But be careful, because that action may be concrete, such as stealing, but it can also be more subtle, a mental or an emotional reaction, such as continually thinking about something or always wishing you had what everyone else has. But whether it leads to stealing or just to discontent, coveting is always ***spiritual in nature***.

The section in the Ten Commandments on coveting points to its spiritual nature through the items listed that we are not to covet. First among them is, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house." The home is what gives us our sense of inner security. It's a physical refuge, sure, but it's linked to our emotional and spiritual need for a place of safety in this world.

Second in the list on coveting is your neighbor's wife, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife," or the spouse or partner of another. This points to our security in relationship to others, our sense of worldly security, our feeling of being OK socially.

Next in the list against coveting – “You shall not covet your neighbor’s ... male or female slave, or ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” This points to our sense of physical and material security, feeling like we have what we need to get by in life.

The security of home and hearth, the feeling of having at least one close and special relationship, and the knowledge in your own heart of hearts that you have what’s needed to get by in life, these are what’s at stake in the commandment against coveting.

Last week we saw how God’s commands that we honor our fathers and mothers and do not murder, commit adultery, steal, and lie actually empower us to preserve our basic humanity. Well, if those commandments empower us to preserve our humanity, the commandment we’re looking at today empowers us to protect and preserve our spiritual and emotional wellbeing.

While elder abuse, murder, adultery, stealing and lying are all concrete actions, coveting – coveting is a spiritual action, an emotional state. By commanding us to not covet, God is empowering us to overcome that which otherwise becomes a subtle and dangerous way of being. God is empowering us to overcome a spiritual discontent that leads to some very misguided actions and attitudes, actions and attitudes that are not only quite dangerous, but also more and more common and quite pervasive in society today.

Each year, one of the nuns who ran Sacred Heart parochial school in San Francisco would give her second graders an exercise. She would ask them to draw a picture of what they would like to do with Jesus if he would decide to come and be with them for one day.

The kids seemed to like this assignment and would come up with some interesting responses. The most interesting – and illuminating – came from one little girl who said to the nun, “Sister, my drawing is almost finished, but I have a question to ask.” “Sure, what is it?” “Sister,” said the little girl, “how do you spell Bloomingdale’s?” That’s what she wants to do if Jesus would come and spend the day with her – go shopping at Bloomingdale’s.

By commanding us to not covet, God is empowering us to overcome that which would turn Jesus into a Bank Machine, turn our faith into the means for getting all of our wants and desires fulfilled.

In Jesus Christ, we are children of God, but society would make us children of capitalism, of consumerism. Remember a couple of Sundays ago when we looked at the first commandment – “You shall have no other gods.” And I told you that in Hebrew, the commandment actually says “there will not be to you” any other gods, that there, God is actually banishing all other gods from our lives, so that we are free from the hold that any other people or things or desires or fears or loves may have on us? Do you remember that? Some of you do.

Well we could look at the last commandment in the same way – there shall not be for you any reason to covet your neighbor’s house, wife, slave, donkey, or belongs.

But how; how could that be? How can it be that we could be free from the jealousy and envy and degradation that come from looking at what others have and wishing – oh wishing so much – that we could have it, too; that we deserve it, need it, must have it!

Just think of the spiritual and emotional freedom that would come in being released from coveting, and in its place being given access to a completely fulfilled and peaceful state of being.

That's what we have been given in the 10th commandment, access to a spiritual fulfillment that trumps any and all of our wants and desires. But how can we achieve such fulfillment, and maintain it?

We can achieve a more fulfilled, content and peaceful life by recognizing what it is that's at the root of our deepest unmet desires – those "needs" and wants that make us jealous and unfulfilled. At the core of the desire for a bigger and better house is our need for status and security.

But in God's eyes, we are all of equal status and we are all equally loved and provided for. Knowing that is how we gain access to a more peaceful and fulfilling way of life. At the core of the desire for someone else's spouse or life partner is our need for intimacy.

But God sees us all as his beloved children, brothers and sisters in Christ, friends and partners with Jesus. At the core of the desire for someone else's property – or the ability to make lots of money and buy more stuff – is our need for status and leisure and fun.

But there is no greater joy than to do the work of the Lord, there is no better pathway to a life of leisure than to embrace the gifts of the Spirit, and there is no higher status than to be in relationship with God.

These are the gifts we receive in the last of the Ten Commandments, gifts that can overcome our covetous nature. The gifts of the 10th commandment are ***the gift of security as a child of God***, the gift of intimacy as God's beloved, and the gift of our status as a follower of Christ, a servant of the Lord.

I don't care how big or small your house is, how successful or strained your relationship is, or how much or how little you have in the bank – none of it matters if you are not right with God.

As a child of God, you have what you need to be secure, today. As the beloved of God, you have what you need to be fulfilled, today. As a servant of God, one of God's workers in this world, you have access to the material goods that you need to live another day.

And if you don't have these things – if you feel insecure in your own skin, if you feel unloved in the company of others, if you feel deprived of the basic necessities of life, that's not because of the way the world is treating you, not ultimately. No, ultimately, that has everything to do with how you treat the world, how you – how we – interact with the gifts that God has given to us.

We are not meant to have all of our physical and material and social needs met – at least not at the expense of our spiritual wellbeing. And certainly we are not meant to have all of our wants and desires given to us. But we are, as God’s beloved children who have been sent into the world to do the Lord’s work, we are meant to have an undeniable sense of spiritual fulfillment.

And the place to start is by getting right with God – so right, in fact, that for you – for us – there are no other gods; for you – for me – all of life is sacred; so right with God that for you and for me, there is nothing more cherished or sought after or anything more dearly coveted than God.

To reach that state of being – that way of life – start in this way, start by getting right with God. Because if you do that – get right with God – then God promises to make all things right with you, to God’s glory, in service to Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Holy God, like all children, we need rules so that we can learn our boundaries. As a loving parent, you have given us rules – not to punish us – but to instruct us.

The commandments you give bring wholeness to our lives. When we keep your commandments, we honor you and everyone with whom we are in community.

Continue to guide and instruct us. For it is only with your help that we can stay on the right path.

We pray, O Lord, for those who have lost their way, that you would guide them – as you do us – in your ways.

We pray for the victims of senseless violence and for those responsible, that you would comfort the victims and confront the guilty.

We pray for those in need of the strength to get through another day, whether that’s strength of body or soul, of spirit.

Heal those who are hurting, provide for those in need, raise up those who are downhearted.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**