

Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 21, 2010

SERMONS ON EXODUS: XXX
THE COVENANT WORDS: X AGAINST COVETOUSNESS
(Exodus 20:17)

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his man servant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's.

This tenth commandment seems almost superfluous. We have already been warned not to steal, and thus against the greed that lies at its root; and we have already been warned against adultery, and thus against the lust that gives it birth. Is this last commandment simply meant to summarize and underscore? Are the earlier commands not clear enough? And since they were spoken by the Lord God from the smoke and fire of Mount Sinai, how could they be more emphatic and less in need of underscoring? There was a saying we used to quote in Homiletics class in Bible College: “Weak point; shout louder!” God doesn’t need to shout louder, and indeed it would be hard to imagine a more impressive setting and manner for his speaking the Ten Words than that described in Exodus chapter 20. We ought to assume, therefore, that in these ten choice words from the Mount, God is not going to repeat himself.

It might also seem that that against which this commandment inveighs is rather innocuous, or comparatively so. This is not a commandment against the actual taking of a neighbor’s life, or his wife, or his goods, or his reputation, as is the case in the commandments that precede it. It doesn’t directly concern anything physical or external, anything that does any harm to anyone other than ourselves. While the attitude of our heart certainly matters, as the teaching of our Lord makes abundantly clear, it does not seem on the surface that that against which this commandment warns is on a par with the others. –And yet again, we should certainly presuppose that the Lord God is not going to bring this list of his ten most fundamental requirements for his covenant people to a close on a minor point. We would not expect the last commandment to be anticlimactic.

Once again, as repeatedly throughout this series, I think we are put on the right track by zeroing in on the text itself and its context, and what is peculiar about this text in relation to those

that precede it is its wordiness and specificity. We have mentioned that the first three commandments on the Second Table of the Law, those against murder, adultery and theft, consist of only two words each in the Hebrew. They are simple, direct and all-inclusive in their reference. Remember Rabbi Solomon Goldman said, “They whiz, as it were, through the air and strike the conscience of men like an arrow its target.”¹ The ninth commandment against bearing false witness is a bit longer, but still exercises great economy of words to make its point. The tenth commandment, by contrast, goes on and on and on, and concludes finally with a generalization, a summary statement, almost an ‘etcetera’: “nor anything that is thy neighbor’s.”

Those who see this commandment as a return to the issue of stealing or adultery, as many do, miss the point. By the explicit inclusiveness of this list, as opposed to the explicit generality of the preceding commands, we are directed not only to one part, the coveting of a farm or a servant or a beast of burden, but to covetousness itself, whatever its form, whatever its object. The focus is the coveting heart. It matters not whether you are coveting something substantial, like your neighbor’s house or Naboth’s vineyard, or something as innocuous as, . . . well, I guess, if you are coveting it, it is not innocuous. That’s why the verse ends with the all inclusive “anything that is thy neighbor’s.” And it need not be anything physical or material. It can be his reputation, or his honor, or the preferential treatment he is given. It can be his position, his job title, or his general affability. It can be his height or his build or the fact that he still has all his hair—the list is endless, and surely is not limited to the masculine context in which I have set it. It can even be the fact that the neighbor has been spared some affliction that is yours. The point is the evil and destructiveness of covetousness itself, of that which selfishly desires anything that is your neighbor’s. It is another way of saying that you are to love your neighbor as yourself and to desire that he be in no way diminished by your envious desires.

It takes but little reflection to see that it is the ego-centrism of covetousness that supplies the primary motive that breaks all the other commandments. “Thou shalt do no murder.” It was Cain’s coveting of Abel’s favor with God that led him to do him in. “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” It was David’s coveting another’s wife that led not only to adultery but murder. You can go through the rest of the list. R.R. Reno speaks of “the plenary wickedness of

¹ *The Ten Commandments*, p. 181.

covetousness,” and says it “involve[s] a wholesale violation of the Ten Commandments.”² Did not our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount (which in a certain sense answers to Moses’ Words from the Mount), after reflecting on the ultimate interior implications of the commandment against murder (Mt. 5:15ff.) and adultery (Mt. 5:27ff.), move on in a sort of summary to say that you cannot serve God and mammon (Mt. 6:24ff.), God and anything else. Nothing material must stand before God. Lay up your treasure in heaven, he said, not on earth (Mt. 6:19ff.). Don’t worry so much about food and drink and clothing, but seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you (Mt. 6:25-34). Naturally we have to give some attention to food and drink and clothing, but our Lord is talking about ultimate things, about the primary, underlying focus of our lives. Here he zeroes in on the very heart of the matter.

I have told you more than once that this series of sermons is especially eye-opening for me. It is a true learning experience, and I think I now understand the commandments and their significance much more fully than I ever did before. And what strikes me afresh with regard to this last commandment is that far from being superfluous or minor, it lives in a very real sense at the root of them all. It is a perfect conclusion to the Ten Words—that is to say, I think God got it right! I think this becomes clearer if you think of the Two Tables of the Law, the five concerning love of God and the five concerning love of neighbor, as two pyramids, the first standing normally with the apex at the top, the other underneath it and upside-down, as it were, with the point on the bottom, and each pyramid as divided into five layers for five commandments. At the top of the first pyramid is the first commandment from which all the others flow. “I am the Lord thy God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” A true following of this commandment entails making no images of God, for he is unlike anything else in all creation; not taking his name in vain, for it is holy and unique and utterly venerable; not desecrating his holy day, for he is our creator and redeemer to whom we owe all our days; and honoring our parents through whom God has given us life. At the bottom of the lower pyramid is the tenth, the commandment against covetousness, which if truly followed would preclude our bearing false witness and stealing and adultery and murder.

² “The Tenth Word: God or Mammon,” in Roger E. Van Harn (ed.), *The Ten Commandments for Jews, Christians and Others*, pp. 200-201.

Furthermore, there is a similarity of form between the first commandment and the tenth. The first forbids our having any other gods but God; the tenth, our desiring any other things but that which is rightfully ours. There is therefore within this negative, prohibitive formula, the strongest suggestion of the absolute affinity of man with God and of God's heart with ours, a unity for which we strive. Our utmost desire is not to be for anything that is not ours, but for God, and that the one true God, the creator/redeemer, not for anything that might seem a substitute for him. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one Lord." God is one and unique and complete and at perfect peace and rest within himself. And we are called to unite all our desires in him. "Purity of heart is to will one thing," said Kierkegaard, echoing the Letter of James. To love God with all our being and our neighbor as ourselves calls for perfect inward harmony: no distractions, no division of affections, no shakiness of commitment, no restlessness, no longing for what we do not, and ought not, have.

This brings us back to that rock-solid sense of integrity, of integratedness, without which we can neither love God with our whole being nor our neighbor as ourselves. And the integrity that is the focus of the tenth commandment goes with the integrity that is the focus of the first. In a world without the one true God there is polytheism, whether any of the supposed gods are called that or not. And in that world man is divided against himself, split in a variety of ways, pulled in a multiplicity of directions. The purpose of this last commandment is to wrest us away from all that would divide us, from all that would keep us from being whole. He who covets is by definition incomplete. This tenth word would wrest us away from things to God, to the Lord our God who delivered us out of the house of bondage.

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Thus have we come to the end of the Decalogue, the Ten Words. It is important to remember that they are words: "And God spoke all these *words* saying, . . ." God makes himself known to us not through images, for he is not a thing, nor through concepts, for he is not an idea, but through words, for he is a personal being, and through words that address us whom he has created in his image, to know him and to be answerable to him, to live lives in dialogue and fellowship with him. He speaks to us directly: "*Thou* shalt" and "*Thou* shalt not." We do not know who we really are as human beings until we know ourselves to be addressed by God, and addressed by him at the very core of our being. Note that even though God delivered a

people from Egypt, led a people through the wilderness, and brought a people to Sinai to bind them in covenant to himself, he addressed each of the Ten Words to individuals. Each of us is individually accountable, personally answerable, and we answer not by words but by deeds. It is with our lives that we answer God, by each day and by each hour. Søren Kierkegaard said, “The truth consists not in knowing the truth but in being the truth.”³ These words from Mount Sinai will, if we but heed them, mold us in the truth, in God’s truth, in the only truth. Some people get very excited when the Ten Commandments are not on display in the courthouse. I would far rather see them on display in our lives.

Sermon preached by the Rev’d Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 21, 2010. Copyright © 2010.

³ Quoted in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1995), p. 105.