

People Like Us: Are Content
Exodus 20:1-17

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Several years ago Anita and I had the chance of a lifetime. I had received a grant from the Lily Endowment, which gave us the chance to spend several months with some friends and a congregation in Bali. Let me just say that it is a different world! Even more different than Nova Scotia! They don't have snow there! Even more, the basic story, the underlying myth there is different from any place I had ever lived. It was an incredible experience!

We had been in Bali long enough to begin to get settled in. We had learned how to ride our scooter; how to get to the church, the beach, the market, to the center of town. We were just about/almost feeling at home.

It was Saturday morning when Anita and I decided to make a quick trip to the grocery store. We were gone maybe, maybe an hour and a half. When we got back home the lock on the gate was missing. We looked and the front door was open, the back door, well, the back door had been ripped off! Anita ran in and said, "Our money!" It was gone! Even worse, so were our computers! Our computers—which had the sermons I was going to preach! Even more, they had all my pictures from China which had not been uploaded to the Cloud! All gone!

I sat on the couch of that tiny house and said over and over, "*We have to go home!*" What I was really praying was "*I want to go home! I want to go home where we are safe, where we are not the strangers, where we have a back door!*" Even now it doesn't take much for me to revisit that sense of loss, that sense of being violated, that sense of not being safe.

Have you ever had that experience, that experience of being robbed? Of having something taken from you that shook you to your core?

Then you understand why this commandment is here! "*Thou shalt not steal!*" We don't want other people taking our stuff!

So in the spirit of do unto others we say, "People like us don't steal!" We don't want you taking my stuff so I won't take yours!

But we know that! It is right up there with that one, "*Thou shalt not kill!*" We know that! We don't steal! We don't take things that don't belong to us. We don't rob banks or convenient stores. We don't shoplift. We don't borrow our neighbors stuff without asking! We don't steal! We teach our children that we don't do that!

That was drilled into me as a child! I still remember being in the checkout line at a grocery store with my mother. I asked her if I could get a candy bar and she sorta nodded. At least it looked like that to me! So I took it. We got home and I was eating my candy bar when she saw me. "Where did you get that?" I told her and the next thing I knew we were on our way back to the store where I had to confess to the manager of the store!

We don't steal!

It seems simple enough! And it is. Except when it isn't!

As we have seen over and over again with the commandments, they are never really as simple as they seem. Honoring the sabbath isn't about not opening a store or mowing the grass on Sunday as much as it is about the rhythm of life. Not killing is more than just having our finger on the trigger. It is also working to make sure killings don't happen.

While it is easy to make this commandment as simple as not stealing a candy bar, it really goes much deeper. Martin Luther in his Large Catechism taught that *"stealing is not just robbing someone's safe or pocketbook but also taking advantage of someone in the market, in all stores, butcher shops, wine and beer cellars, workshops, and in short, wherever business is transacted and money is exchanged for goods or services...the poor are defrauded everyday, and new burdens and higher prices are imposed. They (the merchants) all misuse the market in their own arbitrary, defiant, arrogant way, as if it were their privilege and right to see their goods as high as they please without any criticism."* (Remember that was written in the 1500's! Some things never change!)

Most of the time when we think of this commandment we are thinking of personal ethics, what we do as individuals. But Luther reminds us that there is another level of morality—social ethics, corporate morality. This is the morality that deal with the structures and institutions of life. And we must confess that too often, our institutions, our structures steal from individuals in ways big and small.

How often do our structures, even legal businesses, steal from those who can least afford it? That was the message in the movie *The Big Short*, a movie about the financial collapse of 2008. In one telling scene, Brad Pitts' character explains, *"If we're right, people lose homes. People lose jobs. People lose retirement savings, people lose pensions. You know what I hate about @*%\$ banking? It reduces people to numbers. Here's a number - every 1% unemployment goes up, 40,000 people die, did you know that?"*¹ I am still not sure that back then anyone did anything illegal personally. No one was held up at gunpoint, but this commandment was so shattered by systems and structures! And the whole world was harmed!

And the the stealing that this commandment is referring, is not just money or things. It also refers to what we know as kidnapping, stealing people. It was so serious that in the very next chapter, in Exodus 21:16 we are told that the punishment for stealing a person's freedom is death.

I came from Charleston, a city that, as much as we continue to deny it, was built by people whose freedom was stolen. That city continues to be the beneficiaries of a theft that we is rarely acknowledged, that is never really confessed.

And it isn't just historical. Slavery continues! It is estimated that there are nearly 21 million individuals trapped in slavery today—more than at any other time in history.²

¹ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1596363/quotes>

² <http://www.endslaverynow.org/learn/slavery-today>

Some are trying to pay off debts that can never be repaid. There is a whole payday lending industry that does just that—offering a loan until your next paycheck, which sounds great until you realize that they come with a 442% interest rate! How do you ever pay that off? Others trapped in forced labor—threatened with violence if they leave.

Many are slaves in sexual trafficking—stolen for the pleasure and profit of others. I was shocked to learn recently that Nova Scotia has the highest rate of sex trafficking in Canada!³ Around our world there are child slaves working in sweatshops producing the goods that we buy cheaply, while others are married off—child brides who serve as servant and sex slave.

And we turn a blind eye—because it makes us uncomfortable; because to confront it makes us realize our own complicity; because the solutions don't fit neatly on a T-shirt or a political campaign poster. We don't want to admit that our world is still built on a foundation of theft, because if we did....if we did then wouldn't we have to confront it, just like my mother confronted my theft of a candy bar?

And if we want to avoid the obvious-in-our-face commandments, what do we do with that last one? *Thou shalt not covet!* With that one we move from the obvious-public transgression. We know when someone kills—we see the body! We know when there is sexual indiscretion—just read the tabloids, the divorce records. We know when someone steals—the court dockets are full.

But covet? Do we even know what that is? Is it really a sin?

If I am honest, coveting is my favorite sin! The other week I commented to a friend who had done a really marvelous sermon, whose exegesis of a passage just floored me—I told him that I could read that passage for 10 years and never get that insight. I told him I have fallen into covetousness!

Thou shalt not covet. This command is different because it moves from the act to the intention. And how can we be sure about our intentions? Aren't they always a bit suspect, difficult to really distinguish? Coveting is desire, and let's face it, that is what our economy is based on! Our friend gets a new car with leather heated seats, Bluetooth, GPS, better gas mileage, a moonroof and bells and whistles that they haven't even figured out yet. We see it, and somehow our car, that one that is running perfectly well, is paid off, that you were fine with last week, somehow doesn't seem as good!

The entire marketing world is based on making us want, making us desire. But where it moves from marketing, information is when we start wanting more of what we already have too much of! We want more and more, not because we need it, but because we want it! Because she has it. He has it, and I want it. Not only do we want it, but we begin figuring out how to get it—whatever it might be! I will have that computer—even if I have to break down a door. I will have him—even if I have to destroy his marriage. I will have it—even if I have to kill anything that gets in my way!

³ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/sexual-exploitation-human-trafficking-panel-police-victims-1.5280616>

Coveting does not count the cost; it doesn't care about the cost. Coveting will get what the heart wants—no matter what. Others don't matter, only the object desired! I want a new phone—and I don't care if those who made it are so desperate that they are leaping out of buildings! I want a new car, and don't really care how much of our world is destroyed in the making. I want a cheap mortgage, and don't care how many others suffer to make it possible.

I just want the object of my desire. Everything and everyone becomes an object. And perhaps that is where the great sin enters. We no longer are in what Martin Buber, the great Jewish theologian, described as an I-Thou relationship but rather see the world as in terms of I-It.

The person disappears. God disappears.

When we covet we open the door to so many other broken commandments, even more we replace the God who frees us, who provides for us with more stuff! Our desires, our stuff becomes our God.

So how do we avoid coveting? Perhaps we remember the lesson of Søren Kierkegaard, who in one of his best books said simply *"purity of heart is to will one thing,"* to want only God! We remember the words of the Psalmist, who sang, *"As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?"*⁴ We remember how Jesus taught us to pray, trustingly ask *"Give us this day, our daily bread."* This day. Just this day! We remember that Jesus said it plainly, *"Seek ye first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these other things will be added to you."*⁵ We remember the words of that old old hymn, *"Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace."*⁶

Remembering that will keep us content with our lives. That's why we need to remember all these words, these commandments. Not because we have to for God to love us, but to remember and live them because that is how we live as children of God. Living them will help us be who we are created to be. They will save our souls. They will transform our world!

Thanks be to God.

Amen!

⁴ Psalm 42:1-2

⁵ Matthew 6:33

⁶ http://library.timelesstruths.org/music/Turn_Your_Eyes_upon_Jesus/