

COVETING, PROPERTY AND EQUALITY

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Beaverkill Community Church

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I love the parable of the Rich Fool and Christ's admonition not to be anxious. I attained the age of 77 this week. Having lost many friends over the years, I am more than ever mindful of the shortness of life and the importance of finding meaning in life.

Today I would like to present some further thoughts to the excellent message Bob Jones gave us last week about concerns, problems and temptations all mature people have with the acquisition, and disposition, of property, real and personal: land, buildings, chattels, movables, immovables, goods, merchandise, things, or in the words of the comedian George Carlin, just plain "stuff." I hasten to add that I do not look down on people who have achieved wealth, nor do I look down on people who have not. Nonetheless, I was amused by Bob Jones last Sunday when he cited Pearl Bailey's famous dictum: "I've been rich, and I've been poor, and believe me, rich is better."

These concerns and problems about wealth and its stuff are not new. They go back to ancient times, one of the proofs being the many passages in both the New and Old Testaments that deal with property and morality.

This, for example, is the law set forth in the Tenth Commandment, as given by God to Moses, as set forth in Book of Exodus, Chapter 20, Verse 17:

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."

This law speaks to several social concepts, but today let us look primarily at the several social concepts involving property.

"To covet" is a verb seldom used today but carries the meaning of strongly desiring or lusting for something one does not possess. This type of desire, however, goes beyond mere greed just to have more and more stuff. Coveting is widely regarded as a sin of envy, that is to say, a feeling of discontent or resentment aroused by contemplation of other persons' desirable possessions, and a strong and selfish desire to have them.

With this background in mind, we can make a few observations about the scope of this law:

First observation. Violation of this law is a thought crime. Unlike the other Commandments, no physical act, like breaking, entering and stealing, is required to violate this Commandment. The moral imperative of this Commandment, of course, is that coveting is a first step to temptation, and temptation may well be followed by a physical act like theft, murder, adultery, bearing false witness, even bowing down to idols. Recall, if you will, the Lord's prayer, given to us by the Christ himself, in which we petition God not to be led into temptation but to be delivered from the sin of evil acts, like theft.

Second observation: By necessary inference, this law affirms the right of property, the right to have and hold possession and control of real property, like a house; to have and to hold personal property, like an ox

or a donkey, and, just to erase any doubt on the issue, to have and to hold "anything" else that can "belong" to your neighbor.

Third observation. The right of property implicit in the Tenth Commandment belongs to someone who is properly called a "neighbor." Could this someone be a person who lives close by to you? Could it be a friend or someone in your own group or tribe? No one else in a different relationship or category seems included in the commandment. I mention that the commandment "Thou shalt not steal," does not contain any such limitation.

Jesus gives us a possible answer in the well-known Parable of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10, verses 25 to 37. Here, Jesus is confronted by a man learned in the law:

"²⁵ And behold, a lawyer (!) stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" ²⁷ And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii^[c] and gave them to the innkeeper,

saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

So, it looks like the robbers, certainly, are not your neighbors. The unmerciful priest and the Levite also are not your neighbors under this test. But strangers who treat you kindly are your neighbors. Yes, the kindly are your neighbors, and the property of your neighbors you may not covet.

Fourth observation. The Tenth Commandment's inferential exclusion of its application to people who are not neighbors gives rise to an inference that the property of robbers, of unkindly priests and Levites, and of all others outside of the group called "neighbors," could be coveted without violation of the Commandment. And if they can be coveted, can they not be stolen?

This observation I find awkward. Imagine this conversation taking place two thousand years ago: "Hey, Jude, wouldn't it be a good idea to relieve merchant Ringo of some of his stuff, I mean, everyone knows he bought his stuff with money he stole from Samaritans on the road to Jericho, and what he didn't steal he inherited from his greedy father who exploited his workers with starvation wages and, besides, he already has enough stuff for 50 people."

Does this kind of thinking sound familiar in our day? I hear this type of talk on television and the internet, talk about the rich, The One Percent, about income equality and outcome equality, all the time. And you have to ask yourself, if it is OK to covet merchant Ringo's property because he is not a kindly, neighborly kind of guy, is it then also OK to steal it from him? Or

maybe it is better, or easier, or less dangerous, to ask the King to impose a tax on merchant Ringo and take his property and hand it out to others who covet it.

All of this talk seems to run into and afoul of the Tenth Commandment. Perhaps we should remember the observation of George Bernard Shaw that, if a politician takes from Peter to give to Paul, he will always get Paul's vote.

Fifth observation. The kindly Samaritan in the parable was not forced, or commandeered by a King, to save the life of a dying stranger and to hand over his property to him. His merciful acts were wholly voluntary and charitable. He asked for nothing in return.

Perhaps, then, it is better to be grateful for what we have than what we might get, especially by preying on others. In First Timothy, Chapter 6, Paul echoes the Parable of the Rich Fool in writing to his minister son that

"There is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction."

As Bob Jones showed last week, we work hard to get too much stuff and then we work harder to get rid of the stuff so, as the Son of Man advised in today's Gospel reading, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Amen. Ed Cerny

Parable of the Wise Fool in Luke 12: 13-3113

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." 14 But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" 15 And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." 16 And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, 17 and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' 18 And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear 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, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' 21 So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." Do Not Be Anxious. 22 And he said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. 23 For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. 24 Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! 25 And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? 26 If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? 27 Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 28 But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! 29 And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. 30 For all the nations of the world seek

after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. 31 Instead, seek his[e] kingdom, and these things will be added to you.