

“You Shall Not Steal, You Shall Not Covet”

Pastor Jacob Hanson

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Opening Prayer

Good morning Beloved, I hope you are doing well. It is always a joy to come back from vacation, as odd as that sounds, because I find that my heart is rejuvenated and my mind is at ease. Thank you Pastor Clint and Libby for holding down the fort while I was out in the woods quarantined, hunting season is always the biggest of joys for the Hanson household and this year was no exception. We are back in the saddle this morning Beloved, and today we are finishing up our sermon series on the Ten Commandments. After today we will be focusing on the joys of Christmas. In a year filled with difficulty, I am happy to report that December 25th is still going to come and that we are still going to be able to enjoy Christmas. For today, however, our focus is primarily on the 9th and 10th commandments to not steal and to not covet. These two commandments are inextricably linked.

As a reminder the Ten Commandments were the ten basic laws given by the Lord to Moses (and Israel) upon Mount Sinai just after the people had been freed from slavery. While there are of course many different laws and commands and rules that the Lord gives to help guide us in a righteous life (for our own benefit!), He also lays out for His people in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 the basics. If you wanted to boil down how the Lord views righteousness into an easily rememberable form, the Ten Commandments are just that. The first four dictate how our interactions with the Lord should be, and the second six explain what proper relationships with others look like. The reason we are looking at two commandments this morning, to not steal and to not covet, is because these two commandments are linked together. You don't often steal something you don't covet, and you don't often covet something you wouldn't make yours if you had the opportunity. In fact if you look at the explanation given of what we are to not covet in Exodus 20:17 we can see that these are things that people often seek to steal.

Exodus 20:17 reads “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 belongs to your neighbor.” We have all seen and know of instances where these things, or things like them, have been jealously coveted and even stolen. How many of us know about a marriage ruined because someone desired another’s spouse? Or how many of us have experienced the anguish of having something we prize or need stolen? A car, money, a favorite toy as a child, tools, a purse, etc. Maybe in the workplace you have had a favorite coworker or employee stolen away by another department or another employer, or maybe you have had the difficult experience of losing your employment to another who costs less even though they are less qualified. We could even make arguments about how the government likes to steal

something we worked for or paid for, let us say our taxes for roads in our county, and use them elsewhere like up in the cities. Humans, by our sinful nature, covet, and when we covet strongly enough we will steal. Even as Christians we often fall into this trap of coveting and potentially even stealing. Beyond just harming our neighbors, which is itself awful, we can see in our reading from Matthew 19 that it can even affect our salvation.

In Matthew 19:16-26 we read about the rich young ruler who comes to Jesus to inquire about eternal life. From what we can tell the man was well intentioned, really desiring to know what it was that he needed to do to enter heaven. Jesus's first response to the man though, in verse 17, is very ominous and should not be forgotten by us. "And He said to him, 'Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.'" Jesus Himself says that there is only one who is good. Care to guess who that one is? I'll give you a hint, it isn't you, or your friends, or your kids, or your favorite politician, or your spouse, or even Saint Paul or Peter. Jesus right away is making the statement that to be truly good, to be worthy of eternal life, you have to follow all the commandments. How interesting is it that the rich young ruler's response to that statement is to ask in verse 18 about which commandments he is to follow. Jesus answers with "You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and mother; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." That is only five of the commandments that Jesus lists. Jesus does not list the first four commandments, which are all in relationship to right standing with our Creator. Perhaps those commandments were ones that the man had actually followed well, or maybe they were ones he could explain away. But the one curious commandment that Jesus does not mention, "You Shall Not Covet," is one that we can see hurts the rich young ruler.

Matthew 19:20-22 reads "The young man said to Him, 'All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?' Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.' But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property." Beloved, this is the tragedy of the young man. It wasn't really his possessions that Jesus was after, it was his soul, and his stuff got in the way. We could make the argument that the rich young ruler was not in need of most any earthly thing. He owned a lot of stuff, he didn't have that same temptation to covet that someone with little may have to take from another, but he most certainly held on to the things he possessed... even so much as to walk away from a personal invitation from Jesus Himself. The call by Jesus to give up everything and to follow Him is one that He made to the disciples personally. James and John both left their father in his fishing boat to follow Jesus. The Apostle Paul gave up his position as a Pharisee and great wealth to follow Christ after his encounter with Him on the road to Damascus. This rich young ruler could have been in league with the Apostles, he had been given an offer of greatness the likes of which most of us could only dream... or so we would think. The truth is that we have

much in common with the rich young ruler, and I don't mean in terms of just our bountiful possessions.

“And Jesus said to His disciples, ‘Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.’ When the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, ‘Then who can be saved?’ And looking at them Jesus said to them, ‘With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’” It is easy in our world to forget that we are one bad heartbeat away from eternity. Just by virtue of being born in America we are within the richest one percent of people who have ever lived. Cell phones, cars, and plenty to eat... modern America is rich Beloved, especially compared to previous generations. I am not denigrating those of you who have had less over the years, in fact in college I lived on very little so I understand, but most of us don't know what it is like to be truly poor. Even the poorest of us growing likely had enough to eat on the farm. Even the poorest of us growing up probably were able to go to school and receive an education. Most of us now have much in common with the rich young ruler in terms of many possessions, and while we may not be tempted to steal so much we may covet quite a bit. We never have enough, and what we do have we tend to jealously guard... even though it may hurt our salvation. More than your actual possessions Beloved you have been given a gift and a calling just as the rich young ruler was given. Eternal life, Beloved, is yours if you cling to Christ. If you call Jesus as your Savior, if you repent and cling to Him, foster a relationship with Him, love Him and all that He loves, then your soul is secure. The rich young ruler was offered a place with the greats, well so are you. But it comes with a price. Jesus can't be second place, and if we covet things, if we are jealous of created things, if we go so far as to steal things that are not our own... then we are not content in Him and our faith is compromised.

Long story short Beloved, do not be given over to covetousness. Be grateful for that which you have been given, and find your contentment in Christ over all else. Your salvation depends upon it. There is one last thing that we have to talk about this morning before we end the sermon, and it is of extreme importance to us. We talked mostly about the commandment to not covet, but we are also told not to steal. It is a self-explanatory commandment, is it not? But I don't want to talk about us doing the stealing, I want to talk about us being stolen from.

In 2020 many of us have had our joy stolen. Things have been different, or hard, or painful, etc. But we should not let this year, nor the evil it has brought, steal our true joy. Last Sunday Advent began, and it ends of course on Christmas. I think I can speak for all of us that we need the joy of Christmas this year, the reminder that Jesus has given us. Our final reading was from the beginning of Matthew, the birth of Jesus. The joy of Christmas, Beloved, is that our Lord came into the world to save us from our sin, to save us from evil, to save us from all the things that destroy. 2020, Covid, politics, national unrest, even death cannot separate us from the joy that is coming. It isn't presents that give us this true joy. It isn't family get togethers that give

us this true joy. It isn't tradition that gives us this true joy. It is nothing but the salvation that comes through Christ that sustains us, that fulfills us, that gives us the joy we so desperately desire. You see the truth is, Beloved, that just as Jesus Himself said it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. In fact it is impossible, as the disciples noted, for anyone to be saved of their own accord. But the joy is that just as Jesus noted, with man this is impossible... but with God all things are possible. That forgiveness from sin, the forgiveness from the willful violation of God's laws, is found in none other than Jesus who came to us all those years ago. Our joy, our hope, is found wrapped up in Him who was born of a virgin. We are going to hear the hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem" in a moment. It is a hymn you have probably heard a thousand times when it comes to Christmas, but today I want you to really listen to the words. "The hopes and fears of all those years are met in thee tonight." "So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven." "O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!" Let us pray.

Closing Prayer