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The Eighth and Tenth Commandments: You shall not steal; You shall not covet - Having, Needing, Wanting ©
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Scripture: Exodus 20:15,17; Ephesians 4:17-32; Matthew 6:24-34

I shoplifted once when I was a kid. It was at the Ben Franklin in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. I was in the 4th grade and my friends and I wanted to see what it was like. It was a rush - very exciting and clandestine. I thought my other two friends would do it, since it was a dare. But I was the only one who made the heist. I don't even remember what it was: a pack of Bubble Yum, a balsa wood glider, some M&Ms.

As the day wore on, the pressure of guilt weighed more and more heavily on my mind and soul. By the end of the day, I felt horrible, like I had tar and dirt lining the inside of my skin. So the next morning, I went into Ben Franklin and returned what I had stolen. The shop owner was grateful but stern. He did not ban me from the store, but I never was able to go in again without being watched and followed.

Stealing from others, removing their property, is, in the words of Thomas Watson, a great Puritan preacher from the late 1600s, a great sin against neighbor and an expression of unbelief in God. Whether small things or great things, whether done by individuals or by governments and institutions, it is an expression of the worst and darkest impulses of the human being.

When we are called to live into the new life of Christ and to throw off our old self, Paul is calling us to reject what we are told we need and to examine closely what it is we really want. Living into the new life of Christ means we begin to make some decisions about what we really need. I believe most stealing and theft is driven from a sense of need.

As we examine the Eighth and Tenth Commandments, we need to keep in mind the *spiritual law underneath the commandment*:

I will protect, maintain and bless the possessions and things of my neighbor and do everything in my power to allow for them to protect and maintain the blessings they have received from God.

Once we accept the new life in Christ, we also flip the world upside down. Even though it may appear to us that the tables of economic justice have gone haywire, we do not do things to actively or passively remove what our neighbor owns and possesses (stealing); and we do not do things which actively or passively undermine our neighbor's ability to gain or maintain what they do have (coveting). Instead, we actively encourage and help our neighbor maintain those things they possess. We do so because we see the blessings of God in what our neighbor has, whether they are few things or many things, inexpensive or very expensive things, small or large things.

I am convinced, in contrast to my shoplifting story, most stealing is driven by a sense of need. We say to ourselves "*I know what I need because you have what I want*". Think of Jean ValJean from *Les Miserables*. His entire life is sent into a revenge-filled trajectory because he needed a loaf of bread in order to feed his starving family. Alexander Dumas does an excellent job of setting the scene when Jean ValJean steals the loaf of bread by presenting it as his only option to avoid increasing hunger. Part of what gives the story power and fuel is the sense of justification we feel for ValJean and the extremity of the punishment relative to the crime of need. Even though Dumas wrote the story as an adventure novel, we are asked to question the entire situation surrounding the fallout

from the French Revolution and the inattention given to the working and under classes.

We are asked to wonder who has stolen more - Jean ValJean in an attempt to keep his family from starving to death, or the French Government and business leaders who have upstreamed all the wealth to their personal accounts. Both claim *needs* in their justification for stealing. But Dumas, rightfully, increases our sympathy for ValJean, until at the end ValJean is a defender of the underclass even in the midst of his own great wealth.

ValJean wants the bread because of the needs of his family. The power system of the French elite need their things and money because they want it. By the end of *Les Miserables*, we see that the true robbers and the true thieves are those who would dispossess the poor and working people of what little they have cobbled together in their difficult lives. Rather than honoring, maintaining and protecting the blessings received by hard work, the French elite set up a system which dispossessed the poor and working class from their hard-earned blessings for the sake of their personal needs and desires. In Dumas' mind, the lesser sin - stealing bread - is the direct result of a far greater sin - stealing the earnings and possessions of those who have very little to enrich the very few.

When our sense of need overrides the ability to maintain and protect the blessings received by our community, whether in active or passive ways, we are stealing from our neighbor. *I know what I need because you have what I want.*

Coveting our neighbors' things and property is more insidious. Coveting is all about want and desire. It is about what I deserve because of who I am in my own mind. When we covet, we say to ourselves, "*I know what I want because I need what you have*". Coveting means we undermine our neighbors' capacity to maintain or even gain possessions. Coveting means putting little tendrils out into the community that such-and-such a person does not deserve what they have, and we seek to create a negative view of our neighbor so they, on the one hand, will lose what they have, and on the other hand, we will gain what they had. Coveting is dark and evil because it is so crafty.

To give into coveting means to give into what Paul describes as being "*darkened in understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance in them, due to their hardness of heart.*" We allow our eyes to be clouded over when we covet. Coveting means we must do what we spoke of in the Sixth Commandment - dehumanize and devalue a person in such a way that they are deserving of being dispossessed of their things.

It is one thing for me to look at the World Ship that was here in the harbor last year, where all the multi-multi millionaires and billionaires live as they travel around the world in opulent luxury and stay in international waters so they cannot be taxed by anyone anywhere, and think to myself *I wonder what it would be like to live on that ship*. It is one thing to think, even, "*I want to live on the World Ship*". But the coveting move happens when I diminish the people who live on the World Ship and believe they do not deserve to live on that ship, or perhaps even because of the way they live, they do not even deserve to live. There are people who think like that. Now my understanding darkens, my life becomes alienated from a life in God. In my ignorance, my heart hardens. I passively covet what those people have. I may even actively cut them down in my discussion with others, even though I don't even know who they are. I do it because *I know what I need because they have what I want.*

If stealing is an activity of perceived or actual need and coveting is an activity of desire and want, then we have a lot to look at within ourselves. As with all the other commandments, we do not get off easily here. You

and I may never have actively stolen something from another. I am guessing most of us have coveted in one way or another, but only passively. Few of us, I hope, have set out to defraud and dispossess our neighbor of what they have by nefarious and covert means. But you and I are participants in a huge economy heavily motivated by need and want. And we are motivated by manipulated need and want. We are surrounded by advertising. We are marketed to from every corner in our lives - the tv, the billboard along the road, the radio sponsorship, on and on and on. It is deliberate and designed to persuade, to sell.

And what is the key to any sale, whether by advertising or any other means? To convince you, the shopper and consumer, that what you **want** is really what you **need**. *I know what I need because you have what I want* is impressed upon us by the beautiful people on television who show us that if we own the car we participate in the vast wealth of the vastly wealthy. *I know what I want because I need what you have* is driven into us by something as simple as the layout of the superstore up the road. I thought I just wanted my Archos 80 tablet, and I did want it. But when I got it I didn't need it. Then I started using it. It was kind of cheap and it was a first generation machine because I buy at the front end and I have little impulse control where cool things are involved. It froze. It was slow pulling up documents from my Google Drive and Dropbox. So when the Nexus 7 came out, I *needed* it. And now, I really do need it. It is enmeshed into my workflow. If the solar flare hits tomorrow and knocks out the electric grid, I am in serious trouble.

I tell you this as an example of how we, as Americans who, even in difficult economic times swim in great wealth and access, cannot tell what is a need and a want anymore. We have no capacity to tell the difference. Based on our own motivations and perception, we have no way anymore of determining not only our needs and wants but also the needs and wants of others. And so politically and culturally, we attempt to define and control those for everybody. Is good health insurance something I want or is it something everyone needs? Depending on who you identify with politically, you will have a different answer.

All of this has pushed us way outside the realm of God. Wanting and needing are real and even necessary aspects of our being. Our wants, our desires, push us toward better ways of being and better things. Our needs, our basic impulses, make sure we can achieve what we desire. When we recognize our needs and desires as God-given and God-directed, however, then the focus begins to shift. I believe the hardest thing we can do is to trust God for all things. Trusting God means shedding the old self, a self defined by our earthly needs and wants. It means letting go of all those comparisons which determine who deserves what in this world. It means looking for and accepting the blessings of God which surround us, not just for myself but for everyone I encounter.

Matthew 6:24-34 is one of my favorite verses, but most often it exists as an intellectual and sort of sentimental reflection point for me. I know I cannot serve two masters, but what I do not know very well at all is how to divorce myself from my personal wants and needs in order to "*not be anxious about my life, what I will eat or what I will drink, nor about my body, what I will put on.*" I look at the birds of the air and the lilies of the field and, like many of you, do *not* trust God to clothe and feed me. I worry about tomorrow's troubles as much as I worry about today's.

I think we can get closer to Jesus' radical call of trust by recognizing the spiritual law underneath our commandments today. Rather than figuring out *I know what I need because you have what I want*, or *I know what I want because I need what you have*, we might instead ask *what am I doing to protect, maintain and foster the ability of my neighbor to keep, achieve and maintain what she and he have and want?* When that is our focus - honoring the blessings God has given to self and neighbor alike - then we begin to inhabit the non-anxious self to which Jesus calls us.

Stealing and coveting are not, as Paul says, *the way we learned Christ*. Instead, in the new self Christ has clothed us, we can begin to live in the way the Ephesians are asked to live:

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear... Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Now, in the new life of Christ, *I am not anxious. I know I have what I need because you have what you need*. Your wants and needs become my concern, because they are God's concern. The lessening of my anxiety is dependent on the lessening of your anxiety about what you need and what you want. Now, we learn together how to trust God, because we know how much more the Lord cares for us than even the sparrows and ravens of the air and the lilies of the field. *Even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these*. Instead, *seek first the kingdom of God*, the kingdom where what I need and what you need are the same things, surrounded as we are by the love and forgiveness of God, *seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you*. We learn to trust the Lord by seeing the needs of others fulfilled by our work for the Lord. We learn to trust God by the fulfilment of our needs by the work of God in the lives of others for us. Let us trust the Lord together.

Amen.