

SERMON TITLE: "Ten Commandments 8 & 10: Control Your Desires"

SERMON TEXT: Exodus 20:1-17

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: January 28, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

If you've been following this sermon series on the Ten Commandments, you know that I've been talking about two of them each week. On January 7, we summed up commandments one and two as "worship God first and only." On January 14, we saw how commandments three and four come together in the instruction to "practice holy living." And, last Sunday, we covered commandments five and six, the tall goalposts that give us the instruction to "respect other people."

So, it would be logical if you thought that I would be pairing up commandments seven and eight today. But every plot line needs a few twists and turns, right? So, I decided to save the commandments about adultery and false witness for February. Today, instead, we're going to focus our attention on commandments eight and ten: "You shall not steal" and "You shall not covet"—or, to put that another way, "Control your desires."

1—AS AN INDIVIDUAL

Those of us who regularly read *The Standard Examiner* are acquainted with Brian Wood, who has, for several years, written a column in the paper. Week after week, Brian would tell us what it was like to live behind the bars of the Central Utah Correctional Facility in Gunnison. He would write about prison food, prison cellmates, prison vocabulary, prison rewards and punishments, and prison programs of education and training. He sometimes wrote in generalizations about the characteristics of his fellow prisoners, and what problems he suspected were behind their lack of successful rehabilitation. He frequently reflected on his own struggles inside the prison and the challenges he expected he would face when that day came for his eventual release.

At the end of his four year-incarceration, Brian wrote that, "with a little guidance, some observations, a lot of introspection, and plenty of time to put it all together, I have learned some

valuable truths.” The lessons Brian learned “the hard way” were these: “Honesty is the only way, discipline is worth the rewards, and attitude is everything.”¹ For a guy who was addicted to drugs and convicted of drug possession, prescription fraud, and burglary, having a good attitude about honesty and discipline will be absolutely necessary to control his desires.

Because I’ve appreciated reading Brian’s column and insights, I was glad to see that Brian will continue to write his column, now as a parolee facing many opportunities and challenges on the outside. In his first such column from parole, Brian wrote about things he had forgotten—like how much money he owed for child support, to the IRS, to collection agencies for things he couldn’t even figure out, and to banks for two houses that had been foreclosed. After four years in prison, Brian had been looking forward to a fresh start. But Brian’s financial situation is in such a mess that he can’t even get a bank or credit union to set him up with an account. His desire for drugs had led him to beg, borrow, and steal to the point of criminality, and his lawlessness is now on public record.

I’m telling you about Brian because he’s a clear example of the consequences of not obeying commandments eight and ten. Addiction to drugs, alcohol, prescription medications, or food; addictions to exercise routines, hobbies, or work; addictions to sex or pornography; or addictions to any other kind of obsessive behavior can be a form of covetousness. Our desires run amok. We want something beyond what we already have or who we already are. Instead of finding satisfaction in our relationship with God and the positive gifts and opportunities that God has given us, we want more. More stuff. More thrills. More recognition. More beauty. More happiness. More power. More control.

When we covet, we operate under the notion—true or false—that other people have something we want. And, usually, we think that they got that something without much effort. Maybe they did. Maybe they didn’t. But often, in our coveting, we’re convinced that we deserve to have what other people have, and that there should be a quick and easy way for us to fulfill that desire. And the more we obsess about that, the more likely we are to venture into thievery. We convince ourselves that we deserve something without cost. So we claim it. We take it. We possess it. We steal it.

Oh, yeah. Sometimes we just “borrow” it with good intentions of returning it or paying it back. But then life happens, and we don’t get around to it. And before we know it, others have suffered loss and deprivation because of our behavior. When we borrow money and then default on loans, that’s a form of stealing. When we don’t pay child support, we’re robbing a livelihood from our kids. When we cheat on our income taxes, we deprive our government of the necessary revenue to provide health and safety; education and economic development; infrastructure and leadership. When we freeload on the generosity of others and don’t do our share, that’s a form of stealing.

2—IN OUR SOCIETY

Typically, we think of coveting and stealing as acts of individual persons. We think of them as temptations and sins of the poor, who are looking with longing toward the rich. But these out-of-control desires can also manifest themselves in big ways in our society, as modern-day robber barons steal from the lower classes by influencing political decisions in their own favor.

A recent article in the newspaper described the way that our society is pulling apart, with those who depend on earned wages on one side and those who make their livelihood from the stock market on the other side. The article’s analysis went like this. During the 32 years between 1948 and 1980, hourly wages increased by 90%, and stock market values increased by 145%. That’s a difference, to be sure. But listen to what happened next. In a similar timespan, in the 36 years between 1980 and 2016, hourly wages only increased by 14%, while the stock market increased by 502%.²

That’s great for anyone who has a 401(k), or was fortunate enough to own some stocks and go along for that joy ride. But can you see what our economic policies are doing to our country? The have-a-lots are becoming much wealthier, while regular working folks are falling behind the inflation rate. From 1980 to 2016, prices increased by 191%,³ which means that our costs of living essentially tripled. But wages increased by only 14%. That means stock owners, who got a 502% increase, are now able to buy almost twice as much stuff as they could in 1980. But, in that same time—in the decades of my working career—we wage-earners have lost about 40% of our purchasing power.

We can look at that socioeconomic change as fate, as something beyond our control, or we can recognize that there are people who are making decisions and policies. There are people who determine who wins and who loses. There are people who are using their power and influence to covet and steal what belongs to other people.

Mahatma Gandhi famously said, "The world has enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed." Just because someone has the ability to outwit other people and make a fast buck doesn't necessarily mean that person should do so at the expense of others. When we covet and steal, there are consequences not just to us, but also to those who are victimized by our actions.

In the year 2000, I went on a mission trip to Nicaragua. It was my first visit to a poor country. Our Volunteer in Mission team worked for a week in a mountain village that had been decimated by Hurricane Mitch. The torrential rains and flooding had destroyed the houses of those already-poor farmers and wiped out their crops. When we arrived on the scene a couple years later, many of the people were still living in lean-tos made from a few boards, some metal panels, and sheets of plastic—and they were eagerly awaiting the maturation of their corn crop because they were very hungry.

We worked alongside those villagers who were making bricks out of horse manure and mud. We dug foundation trenches. We sifted sand to make mortar. We tied rebar and assisted the bricklayers. And the strong ones in the group carried heavy bags of cement. The homes that we helped to build were only 20' x 20' square. But those solid brick structures were going to be miraculous improvements over what the families had been living in.

At the end of the week, we left that mountain village and drove back to the capital city of Managua. Tired of beans and rice, we wanted to treat ourselves at McDonald's. But what we saw there shocked us. Instead of a middle-class, or lower-middle-class establishment like in the United States, McDonald's in Nicaragua was a place for rich people to eat. Inside the McDonald's were pampered women and children dressed in designer clothing. Their makeup, hair styles, and fashion would have been appropriate in Manhattan or Paris. Outside, in the parking lot, there were expensive Toyota Land

Cruisers watched over by rifle-toting guards making sure that the coveting hungry poor didn't come anywhere close to stealing.

The contrast between the impoverished mountain village and the McDonald's almost took our breath away. If we hadn't been so desperate for American food, it might have taken away our appetites as well. As long as my brain functions, I'll never forget that experience of seeing so starkly the difference between the haves and the have-nots. In a society in which the rules and laws are determined in such a way as to protect and enhance the rich so they can obtain more and more, while the poor suffer so horribly, who, really, are the thieves? Who's doing the coveting? Who's not controlling their desires?

CONCLUSION

In a capitalistic economy, we're trained by advertising to think that consumerism is good, that desire for more is natural. We think of happy, successful people as those who have set their hearts and minds on a desire and have done whatever it takes to achieve that goal. And maybe there are some wants and desires that are worthy of that kind of determination. But there are also some other considerations we need to keep in mind. When we want more, and we strive to get it, are we hurting someone else? Are we depriving someone else of what is rightfully theirs? Does our belief that we have a right to the good life and the resources of this world diminish what's available for others? As the Ten Commandments remind us, we people of God have a responsibility to control our desires.

¹"On the verge of his release, here's the lessons Brian learned from prison," 1/2/18, 2A.

²Christopher Ingraham, *The Washington Post*, in *The Standard Examiner*, 1/17/18, B6.

³<http://www.in2013dollars.com/1980-dollars-in-2016?amount=100>