

I

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to play golf with an old friend I hadn't seen in several years. He plays golf about once a week, whereas my work and family responsibilities allow me a few rounds per year. He has a very nice, nearly brand-new set of golf clubs, whereas mine are starting to show their age a bit. On the first tee, he pulled out a sleeve of new golf balls that are the top-of-the line, whereas I dug through my bag of used balls my cousin collected for me out of his backyard. As we waited to tee off, he shared stories about a recent trip to Scotland, during which he had the opportunity to play some of the most historic and famous golf courses in the world.

My friend is a huge Clemson fan, and during a break in the round, he took a phone call from another Clemson fan who convinced him that they should go ahead and book their airline tickets to the national championship football game now, and so he finished the call and did just that, on the spot. Someday my beloved Missouri Tigers might get to play for all the marbles, but I know that they'll have to go through Georgia to get there, rather than say, Georgia Tech.

My friend is a great guy, and I sincerely enjoyed our time together. He was nothing but kind and courteous to me the entire day. I had the privilege to spend both time and money playing a game on a beautiful summer day. So why was I feeling a little bit blue on my way home?

II

Maybe you've had a similar experience. Maybe you've run into a friend or acquaintance you haven't seen in a long time, or you've stumbled across their social media feeds, and without even being conscious it's happening, you start to feel a little blue, or perhaps the color is more a shade of green, as in green with envy. It's nothing personal against your friend, but you start thinking to yourself, I wish I had *that* thing. I wish I got to go to *that* place. What I wouldn't give to be *them*.

III

This summer, we've been making our way through a series of sermons we've titled, "Words to Live By" as we study The Ten Commandments. And today we finally come to the tenth commandment. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.

As we've been making our way through, we've been learning a memory device for the Ten Commandments using our ten fingers. And so here is today's memory device

for the tenth commandment: put your ten fingers in the air, and wiggle them, and then whine like you're a toddler and say, "Gimme gimme gimme."

As we've been saying all summer, the Ten Commandments did not just fall out of the sky one day, and they cannot be properly understood apart from the larger biblical story of the liberation and redemption of God's people as told in the story of Exodus.

When the book of Exodus opens, our ancestors in faith, collectively called the Israelites, to whom we trace our heritage through Jesus of Nazareth, were not living in the Land of Promise. Because of a worldwide food shortage, they had fled to Egypt, in search of a better life for themselves and their children. And at first, they were welcomed by the Egyptians as neighbors and friends. They lived side by side with the Egyptians and became important contributors to the Egyptian economy. Since emigrating to Egypt, our Israelite ancestors had been nothing but peaceable, hardworking neighbors, but Pharaoh said:

"Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore, they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Ramses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless.¹

So ruthless that the Israelites cried out to God for deliverance, and God remembered the covenant that God had made with their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and God led the people out of Egypt – hence the name of the book, Exodus.

And so the Ten Commandments, then, are not so much a set of rules to be followed. Rather, they are the charter of a new nation. They are the means by which God is transforming former slaves, former refugees, a people who were and had nothing, into God's covenant people, God's royal priesthood, God's holy nation. The Ten Commandments are the framework for building a just and moral society.

And read another way, the Ten Commandments are a repudiation of the values of Pharaoh's empire.²

Pharaoh's empire was driven by the notion of scarcity, the idea that there's just never enough – never enough food, never enough water, never enough people. Pharaoh was so envious of the Israelites' prosperity and their high birthrates that in a fit of

¹ Exodus 1:9-13, NRSV

² My thoughts on the notion of the biblical story as counter-testimony over and against the values of Pharaoh's empire were deeply shaped by Walter Brueggemann's essay, "The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity." <https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-liturgy-of-abundance-the-myth-of-scarcity/>, accessed August 29, 2019.

jealousy, he ordered all the Israelite baby boys to be thrown into the Nile River. And then he had the Israelite slaves build supply cities – because in Pharaoh’s empire, there can never be enough.

But the God of our ancestors is the God who has infused abundance into the very fabric of creation. The God of our ancestors is the one who, when the Israelites were trapped between Pharaoh’s charging chariots on one side and the deep Red Sea on the other, opened a way when there was no way, and brought our people through on dry ground.

The God of our ancestors is the one, who, when the people found themselves in a barren land with no discernible source of food, caused bread to rain down from the heavens, and quail to cover the ground.

The God of our ancestors is the one, who, when the people found themselves thirsty and without a drop to drink, caused streams of cool, clear water to pour forth in the desert.

And once the people of God were safely out of Egypt, once they had been fed and watered, God called the people together at Sinai and says, in Ryan’s Revised Translation of the Hebrew, “Things are going to be different now. You lived in Pharaoh’s Egypt for 400 years, but today is a new day. This is how I want you to live with me and with one another.” And then God gave them the commandments, not as a set of rules to be obeyed, but as the charter document for building a just and moral society from the ground up.

IV

And the tenth commandment is, “You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

But the truth of the matter, my sister, is that neither you nor your neighbor actually own anything. The biblical reality, my brother, is that everything you have, everything you are, everything you will be, belongs to the God who created you, the God who sustains you, the God who redeems you. Psalm 24:1 says the earth is the Lord’s, and all that is therein.

So everything you have doesn’t actually belong to you, but rather, it’s been entrusted to you by a God who is exceedingly, extravagantly generous. Everything you have, your house, your car, furniture, your clothes, your natural talents and giftedness, your relationships with your family and friends, none of that is actually yours. It’s all God’s, and God has entrusted it to you for your faithful management, or, to use a church word, to your stewardship.

When you covet the things that belong to someone else, when you become envious of others, what you're essentially saying to God is, "There's not enough, there will never be enough, and you haven't given me what I deserve!"

About five years ago, I heard a sermon that I still remember to this day. The preacher was describing his struggles with his personal finances. He had given up a lucrative career to go to seminary, and he had run into a friend from his former career who had a nice car, nice clothes, and seemed to be living high on the hog. The preacher was sharing with us how in his prayers, he found himself saying to God, "Look, I've given up everything to follow your call. I left my lucrative career to go to seminary. I answered your call knowing that the paychecks would be smaller, and that our lifestyle would have to be different. I accept that. But God, you haven't given me enough!"

And as soon as the words came out of his mouth, he heard a voice say to him gently but firmly, "My dear, beloved child, take a look at that cross on that wall, and tell me again about how I haven't given you enough."

The tenth commandment is an invitation to contentment. That's not to say that it's not OK with God for you to have desires, to have dreams and goals for yourself. That's not to say that it's not OK with God for you to work hard for some stuff, and to use and enjoy it. But it's never OK for your stuff to have you.

That's why God commands that the very first thing we are to do when we reap a harvest, the very first thing we are to do when we receive a paycheck, the very first thing we are to do when we come into some money, is to give some of it away.³ Not because it makes good financial sense, but because giving first conditions our hearts and our hands to be generous. Because giving first is a repudiation of the values of Pharaoh's empire. Because giving first is an act that shows that we have put our money where our mouths are, that we will live by the values of the kingdom of God.

V

Never forget, friends, we are in this thing together. It strikes me that with each passing day, the world in which we live and move and have our being seems to be leaning toward the values of the empire of Pharaoh, rather than the values of the kingdom of God.

But God has given us these words to live by, this roadmap to building a just and moral and peaceable society. If you want to build a better nation, here's the framework. If you want to build a better community, here's the blueprint. If you want to build a

³ See, for example, Leviticus 23:9-14, Deuteronomy 26:1-10, Proverbs 3:9, 2 Corinthians 9:6-7

better school, a better business, a better church, a better home, here are ten words to live by:

1. I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not make for yourself any idol.
3. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.
4. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and mother, that it may go well with you in the land.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.

But if that's too much to remember, Jesus gives us the cliff notes version. One day, a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. He said, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest." And Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and all your strength. This is the first and greatest commandment."

But Jesus went him one better. He said, "And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."⁴

So I have just one more memory device for you. Put one finger in the air again. The greatest commandment is to love God. Now, keep that finger in the air and take your other finger, and point it at your neighbor. The second most important commandment is to love your neighbor. Now bring those two fingers and notice the shape they make – the shape of the cross.

Perfect love of God. Perfect love of neighbor.

May we live our lives in the shape of the cross.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

⁴ Matthew 22:34-40, Cf. Mark 12:28-31, Luke 10:25-28