

'You shall not Covet...'

Exodus 20:17

Stories from the Bible and life

Tonight I am going to tell you four stories.

Two of them come from the Bible.

The other two are reflections from encounters I have had in the course of my ministry.

As I tell these stories, I want you to ask yourself what is common among them.

What makes them similar?

Naboth (1 Kings 21:1-29)

The first story is one we met last week.

It is the story of Naboth's vineyard and it comes from 1 Kings 21.

Naboth lived during the time of a notoriously wicked Israelite king, King Ahab, and his wife Jezebel.

Naboth's vineyard had probably been in his family since the time the Israelites had first occupied the promised land during the time of Joshua.

Anyway, King Ahab's palace was near the vineyard.

And he looked at the vineyard and liked what he saw.

And so he offered to buy it from Naboth.

Naboth understandably refused.

Ahab became depressed.

His wife saw his depressions and asked after its cause.

Ahab explained.

And Jezebel expressed her amazement that the King should see something he liked and not be able to get it for himself.

And so she promised to get it for him.

And the way she did it was to arrange for some false testimony to be given about Naboth.

Naboth was accused of cursing God and the king.

And he was condemned to death as a result.

The people of the city took him and stoned him.

And Jezebel went home and told Ahab that the vineyard was now his to take possession of.

And so Ahab took possession of the Naboth's vineyard.

This is our first story.

David (2 Samuel 11-12)

Our second story comes from 2 Samuel 11-12.

And again, we have looked at this story over the last few weeks as we have looked at the commandments.

Let's refresh our minds as to what happened.

You will remember that David's armies were out fighting holy war but that David had decided not to go with them but to stay at home.

Late one afternoon he gets up from his bed and walks around on his palace roof.
He sees Bathsheba naked and bathing.
He likes what he sees and wants her for himself.
So David sends his servants to bring her to him.
He sleeps with her and she becomes pregnant.
David then gets worried and decides that he will try and cover up what he has done.
And so he arranges for the murder of Bathsheba's husband, a man called Uriah.
This is our second story.

A working man

Our third story is about a young university student.
He is a very gifted young man.
He has high ambitions in life – to make a mark on the world in his chosen profession.
However, in his first year at University he happens to be invited to hear someone speak about Jesus.
He is soundly converted.
He becomes a keen Christian and gets involved in a number of Christian causes.
However, his ambitions still sit there under the surface.
And then he graduates.
His ability is recognised by those in his profession.
He is offered promotions.
And he likes the lifestyle that these promotions bring with them.
Before long the demands of his work become more and more profound.
And the lifestyle that his work has brought with it requires free weekends.
At first the goals of using his gifts and wealth to promote the cause of Christ just weakens.
Then attending the church Bible study gets squeezed out.
Then church disappears from the agenda except for Christmas and Easter with the kids.
And then finally, Christ himself disappears from any of his thoughts or aspirations.
This is our third story.

A family woman

The fourth story concerns a young woman brought up in a strongly Christian home.
She loves her parents and she respects their values.
She particularly loves their family focus.
And such a family becomes the thing she wants most in life.
She is not an unattractive woman.
And she has a vibrant faith in her teen years and during her twenties and early thirties.
However, as time wears on she begins to wonder what God is doing to her.
For none of her relationships with men have made it to marriage.
And increasingly the men are no longer showing any interest at all.
And then she meets a guy at work whose values are so different to hers and who has no interest in the faith she holds.
But he does have an interest in her.
And that interest stretches into a proposal of marriage.
She has always been of the understanding that Christians should only marry other Christians.
But she so desperately wants to be married and to have a family that she decides to go ahead.
The day comes and they are married.

His work takes him all around the country and her associations with other Christians gradually lessen.
Her Bible is never read.
And she only prays now to thank God for the birth of the children or before tucking them into bed at night.
Sport and schooling and music for the children somehow squash out any Christian commitment.
And besides that, she finds it so hard to go to these places without her husband.
And when the kids no longer want to be involved in anything Christian he doesn't oppose her but can't offer any support either.
And so God slowly becomes a distant reality for her too.

A common story

Here are the four stories.
The situations may change.
The contexts might be different.
But they can be repeated time and time again.
Did you spot what was common between them all?
Did you notice the thing they all shared?
The thing that they all shared...
The thing that they all had in common...
Was that the beginning of every shift from obedience to God began similarly.
It began with desire.
It began with a yearning for something.
It began with a coveting of something that was not in their possession.
And it is this desire, this coveting, that is the topic of tonight's sermon.
But I want you to remember these stories because we are going to return to them later.
But let's have a look at Exodus 20:17.

Exodus 20:17

'To covet'

The Hebrew word for 'covet' that is used here literally means 'to desire' or 'to take pleasure' in something.
The word can be used in a positive sense or in a negative sense.
However, underneath both senses is the idea of seeing something that stimulates a craving to possess that thing.
Often the word includes the hint of acting to actually take possession of the desired object.
At other times, it seems to mean simply the desire itself.
Implicit in the idea of the word is that you want this object for yourself.
It is not just a desire without a focus.
It is a desire with your own satisfaction in mind.
And so Naboth wants the vineyard **for himself**.
And David desires Bathsheba **for himself**.
And the man from our story wishes success **for himself**.
And the woman from our story wishes family **for herself**.
The thing that makes desire wrong is its focus.
The focus is on the self.

It is inwardly directed.

It is inherently selfish and self-centred.

But before we dig into this idea a bit more, let's quickly take a look the objects of desire that are listed here.

'You neighbour's house'

The commandment says that the Israelite should not covet his neighbour's house, wife, male servant, female servant, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to the neighbour.

The word used for 'house' here literally means 'household'.

The contents of the household go from the most valuable to the least valuable.

And the picture conveyed is comprehensive in scope.

An Israelite is not to covet any item that belongs to a neighbour.

The use of the term 'household' and the covering phrase at the end of the sentence 'anything that is your neighbour's' is meant to emphasise this point.

Nothing is exempt.

What belongs to a neighbour belongs to a neighbour.

It is not to be the object of any fellow Israelite's desire.

The tenth commandment in context

The tenth commandment is an appropriate end of the ten commandments, isn't it?

You see, in their essence the commandments have been about loving God and loving your neighbour.

They have been about being God centred and other people centred.

Covetousness destroys the very foundation of the commandments.

For covetousness is not about being God centred.

It is not about being other people centred.

It is about being self-centred.

It is about thinking that you and your desires are what matters.

And so covetousness sits under nearly every other breach of the ten commandments.

When Jezebel arranged the breaking of the ninth commandment by organising for some false witnesses to accuse Naboth, this tenth commandment had already been broken.

When they stole Naboth's vineyard, coveting had already taken place.

When David committed adultery, theft, and murder, he had already desired for himself.

When the man and woman in our earlier stories slowly drifted away from Christ they had already put their desires in the place of God and therefore breached the first and second commandment and engaged in idolatry.

You see, the tenth commandment is a sort of summary commandment.

It is the commandment that is broken on the way to breaking all the others.

It is therefore a commandment about our disposition rather than a particular deed.

It describes where all the other breaches of the commandments come from – they come from our deeply self-centred nature.

They come from us.

Digging deeper with some NT help

It is this thought that explains a couple of statements in the New Testament.

I want you to take a look with me at Ephesians 5:3-5.

3But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. 4Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. 5For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

Now, keep your eye on this passage and take a look at Colossians 3:5:

5Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Do you see what these two passages say.

In both Paul draws a link.

In both he really says that breaking the tenth commandment is breaking the first commandment.

Coveting...

That is, desiring something with yourself as the focus...

Is to engage in the act of idolatry.

It is idolatrous because it amounts to moving God away from the centre of your existence and to place yourself there.

And if you have placed yourself in the centre of your existence you have not only moved God out.

You have also moved your neighbour out.

And the tricky thing about this action is that of all the commandments this one is the one that is the easiest to hide, isn't it?

You see, you may not have engaged in adultery.

You may not have stolen.

You may not have murdered.

You may not have dishonoured your father and mother.

You may not have set up an idol in the corner of your lounge room.

But who among us has not engaged in covetousness?

And who among us has therefore not been guilty of the most heinous sin – the sin of idolatry?

The tenth commandment exposes us, doesn't it?

It leaves us exposed before God.

Reflecting on the 10 Commandments

And this is where I want us to finish up this evening.

As we reflect on this long series of commandments, I want us to do some reflecting on what we have found.

You see, I wonder how many of you have heard us working through the commandments and found yourself thinking... 'Yes, that one is okay... I'm doing alright there.'

Well, I bet that is not the case today.

I bet there is none of us here today that has never desired something that is not rightfully ours.

That has not said to myself – this I must have for myself, not matter who it belongs to and no matter what God thinks about it.

It can be an object, or a person, or an idea, or anything.

I am confident that there is noone here tonight that has not said in their heart at some time or another, 'I don't care what God thinks, this is what I will think or do or have.'

And the reason that I am confident is that I know in my own heart that what God says about me is true.

You see, there lies in my heart and in your heart a deep disposition toward myself.

A heart inclined toward self and not toward God.

A heart which does not regard God as...

Its highest goal...

Its highest good...

Its highest joy.

This is the nub of the problem.

This is the issue highlighted by the tenth commandment.

This is the problem of human sin – Me.

And the worship of me above God is what the God calls idolatry.

And all of us are guilty of it.

Who will rescue us?

So, the only question left for us tonight is where we can go.

If we are not convicted by our actions in commandments 1 to 9, we are convicted by our hearts in commandment 10.

And if we are found guilty of commandment 10 we are found guilty of commandment 1.

And if we are found guilty of commandment 1 we are guilty of committing the worst of sins.

We are the worst of sinners.

It is here that the New Testament comes to our aid again.

For the New Testament tells us that God knows our predicament.

God knows our hearts.

He knows our deep self-centredness.

And he knows our inability to cure ourselves of it.

And so the New Testament tells us that God acted in Christ.

It tells us that while we were still sinners, while we were still God's enemies, Christ died for us.

It tells us that God sent his only Son into the world to die in our place so that we might be God's friend.

But God did even more than this.

For God poured into our hearts his Holy Spirit – the Spirit of holiness, the Spirit who inclines our wills to his will, the Spirit who is renewing us day by day into the likeness of of His Son.

And this Spirit inclines us toward the things God wishes – to love and joy, peace and patience, kindness and goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

This Spirit inclines us away from the things forbidden in the commandments – things such as sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.

It is Christ who rescues us from ourself.

It is Christ who enables forgiveness.

It is Christ who drives us toward the love of God and our neighbour.

It is Christ who is the one who enables us to fulfil God's royal law reflected in the 10 commandments.