

How Zacchaeus Got His Groove Back

The Tenth Commandment

Exodus 20:1-17

Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy wrote a story entitled *How Much Land Does a Man Need?* I've mentioned this before in previous sermons, but it bears repeating again.

A peasant who had never owned a piece of land was given 20 acres with which to do what he wanted. He was excited at first, then decided he needed more. A traveler came and told him of a place where land was cheap and readily available. So the peasant sold his 20 acres and used the money as a down payment on 200 acres in this new region.

He was excited for a few days but thought he'd be happier if he had more land. And he shared this thought with a chieftain who made him a remarkable proposition. The chieftain would sell him all the land he could walk around in a single day for only 1000 rubles.

But there was a catch. The peasant had to get back to the place he started from before sundown or the deal was off. The peasant could not believe his ears and determined that it was an offer he couldn't refuse. And to mark the starting place where the deal had been struck, the chieftain dropped his fur cap on the ground. That night with thoughts of owning more land, the peasant could hardly sleep.

The moment the sun rose the next day he set out in a dead run from the place where the chieftain and he had made the deal, and all he saw was fertile field after fertile field. In his glee he said to himself, "Now this is mine. Now, this is mine." All day he didn't rest or eat.

In fact, the farther he went, the more fertile the land became and the greater his desire was to possess it. So enthralled was he by what he saw that he failed to take notice of the sun and in the middle of the afternoon realized that he had better head back to the starting point.

That's when a great anxiety came over him, which created an inner panic that caused him to push his body unmercifully. As the sun crept closer to the horizon he ran harder than he had ever run in his life to get back to his starting point.

Just as the last glint of sunlight was fading, he managed to get back to that crucial fur cap and immediately toppled over in exhaustion. He remained motionless for some time. When the townspeople finally investigated, they discovered he was dead. He had so overtaxed his heart and it had stopped.

At that point in Tolstoy's story we come again to the title: "How much land does a man need?" And the answer is: a plot about 2.5 foot wide by 8 foot long by 6 foot deep. It's a timeless story with a thoughtful question, and our response is crucial and decisive!

As Dr. Fosdick reminds us in his great hymn, *God of Grace and God of Glory*, we can be rich in things while at the same time poor in soul. "Grant us wisdom, grant us courage lest we miss Thy kingdom's goal."

As Moses prepared the people to go forward to the promised land, the Ten Commandments were given to ensure that the people of Israel did not miss or forget the goals of the kingdom. Having lived as slaves in Egypt, the people of Israel knew the reality of poverty. And the thought of a land flowing with milk and honey was exciting.

But God knew that money, materialism, and prosperity could be as damaging to the communal and spiritual life of Israel as Pharaoh and his armies had ever been. The people of Israel were going to have a new experience. From no land to much land. And **God wanted His people to remember who had given them the land in the first place.** What would they best do with the land? How would their attitudes and actions be different in their new home from when they served Pharaoh in Egypt?

It's said that President Abraham Lincoln was once seen walking in Washington, D. C. with his two sons, both boys sobbing. A cabinet member asked the President what was wrong with the boys. The President said: "I have three delicious walnuts and each boy wants two of them. This is exactly what's wrong with our world."

God is not against the good materials of the earth. After all, He created them for our use and enjoyment, not to be hoarded by us nor for us to be driven by them. How much land does it take to be happy?

The tenth commandment is right on target. There's a big difference between what I need and what I want. Some needs are appropriate, but many other needs dominate our actions and attitudes and in time create a monster.

Almost every television commercial we watch appeals to the disease of covetousness in the human spirit. Advertisers know exactly what they're doing and unfortunately they're succeeding. But a good many of those offers are not worthwhile and offer things that we can live without.

In his book, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, Rabbi Harold Kushner writes of that ultimate need everyone has: "Our souls are not hungry for fame, comfort, wealth, or power. Those rewards create almost as many problems as they solve. Our souls are hungry for meaning--for the sense that we have figured out how to live so that our lives matter--so that the world will be at least a little different for our having passed through it."

That's what Zacchaeus wanted, too, but he didn't have it until he responded to the invitation of Jesus for a new life. Zacchaeus' story (Luke 19) is that of a man who was robbing his own people in Jericho. And to make matters worse, it was legal. His desire for power, position, prestige – all the things he sought to fill the whole in his soul - did nothing to satisfy him.

And then he met Jesus, who helped him to get his groove back by restoring four-fold everything his covetous ways had gotten him, transforming him to live an honest and ethical life from that point - evidence of the new creation within him.

And while **we think that the sin of covetousness belongs exclusively to the rich**, it does not. It belongs to everyone - which is why it's listed as the tenth of the Ten Commandments.

And we think that covetousness is all about wanting "things" or "possessions". Truth is, we covet all sorts of things - the praise of others, our name in lights or print, the applause of others for a work we've created, an "At-A-Boy" pat on the back, a seat at the head table - all for our glory rather than for the glory of God.

Again, like last week, let me reference Fyodor Dostoevsky's classic novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, wherein he writes the famous Parable of the Onion: "Once upon a time, there was a peasant woman and a very wicked woman she was. And she died and did not leave a single good deed behind."

The devils caught her and plunged her into the lake of fire. Her guardian angel stood and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to tell to God. "She once pulled up an onion in her garden," said he, "and gave it to a beggar woman."

And God answered, "You take that onion, then hold it out to her in the lake and let her take hold and be pulled out. And if you can pull her out of the lake, let her come to Paradise, but if the onion breaks, then the woman must stay where she is."

The angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her; "Come," said he, "catch hold and I'll pull you out." And he began cautiously pulling her out. He had just pulled her out, when other sinners in the lake, seeing how she was being drawn out, began catching hold of her so as to be pulled out with her.

But she began kicking them. "I'm to be pulled out, not you. It's my onion, not yours." And as soon as she said that, the onion broke. And the woman fell back into the lake and she is burning there to this day. So the angel wept and went away."

You can never have a godly nation if the deadly virus of covetousness infects the citizens. You can never have a promised land when the promise of equal opportunity is not available to all. You cannot build trust and have the spirit of compassion when greed governs the hands and hearts of the people. We will never get our groove back until the groove of greed is leveled and a new pathway takes its place.

Even among the 12 disciples, greed reared its ugly head. The mother of James and John wanted her boys to sit on the left and right sides of Jesus. The drive for power, status, prestige has not gone out of style.

When government promotes gambling, casinos, lotteries, it taps into this covetous spirit. And in doing so creates more problems than it solves, which is why God's standards are always far better than the world's solutions.

Jesus knew from first-hand experience the tempting and crippling power of a covetous attitude. Jesus, who was rich, for our sakes left his heavenly home and became poor that he might pay the ransom for our souls. Jesus, who was offered all the kingdoms of this world by Satan, passed on the deal. Jesus taught us to "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added unto you." A covetous spirit listens to others for advice and contentment - a believer turns to God. Which is why we're here today!

Taylor Caldwell in her book, *The Listener*, puts it this way: "Man does not need to go to the moon or to other solar systems. He does not require bigger and better bombs and missiles. He will not die if he does not get better housing or more vitamins . . .

His basic needs are few, and it takes little to acquire them, in spite of all the advertising. Man can survive on a small amount of bread in the meanest shelter. His real need, his most terrible need, is for someone to listen to him, to care for him, to love him, not as a patient; but as a human soul..."

This was the whole point of the Ten Commandments. God had listened and heard the cries of the children of Israel in Egypt and delivered them. Now it was their turn to listen to God.

Because when men and women listen to God's wisdom and will for human life in the simple but profound words of the Ten Commandments, we discover that these laws, the Ten Commandments, were not designed to make life miserable but meaningful, not monotonous but marvelous.

And we discover these laws build a blessed and beloved community where the great gift of God - his Grace - can be shared.