

FULL CIRCLE

Luke 12:13-21

Sixth Wednesday in Lent

March 29, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 12, verses 13 through 21. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 12, beginning at verse 13, we read in Jesus' name.

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." ¹⁴But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." ¹⁶And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, ¹⁷and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' ¹⁸And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." ' ²⁰But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' ²¹So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Commandments Nine and Ten bring us full circle. They bring the Ten Commandments all the way back to the First Commandment and where we started with all this.

The Ninth and Tenth Commandments are really the same. The only difference is that the Ninth has to do with our neighbor's stuff, while the tenth has to do with our neighbor's living things.

At first glance, they seem redundant. They kind of repeat the content of the Sixth and Seventh Commandments. The Ninth Commandment says, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house." This is a lot like the Seventh Commandment, which says, "You shall not steal." They say it in different words, but the idea is similar. Whether we outright rob our neighbor or are more crafty about it, we should not seek to gain possession of his property.

And the Tenth Commandment has a lot in common with the Sixth. The Sixth Commandment says, "You shall not commit adultery." And Jesus teaches us that anyone who lusts has already committed adultery in his heart (Matt. 5:28). This is essentially the same as, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife." Much of the Tenth Commandment was already covered by the Sixth. So the Ninth and Tenth Commandments seem redundant. They repeat themselves, just like I'm doing now.

Redundancy might seem unnecessary. But this is not always true. When engineers design systems, they build redundancies into them, so that, if one part fails, the whole system doesn't completely crash. Good teachers repeat themselves a lot, because they know that their students will probably not remember it the first time, or even the second, third, or fourth. We repeat ourselves for emphasis. Sometimes we say something the exact same way, over and over again. Other times we say the same thing in a different way, hoping that one of those ways will click.

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In the Ninth and Tenth Commandments, God repeats himself, but in a different way, and we learn something new from this. The big difference between the Sixth and Seventh Commandments and the Ninth and Tenth Commandments is that the Ninth and Tenth are targeted at the heart. Six and Seven say, “Do not do evil.” Nine and Ten say, “Do not desire evil.” In fact, most of the commandments leading up to the final two target our outward actions

We can fool ourselves into thinking that we have kept the commandments, or at least some of them. Especially when we get to the commandments regarding murder, adultery, stealing, and bearing false witness, if we don’t look real closely at the commandments, and if we don’t look too closely at our hearts, we might say, “Yeah, I’ve kept those. I haven’t murdered anyone. I haven’t stolen anyone’s wife. I haven’t robbed any convenience stores. And I have not lied under oath.” Unless we’re actually looking for it, we don’t see how those commandments apply to more than just our outward actions. But the Ninth and Tenth Commandments don’t let us off the hook. They target the heart when they say, “You shall not covet.”

So what exactly does it mean to covet? I heard another pastor define it this way, and I think this is helpful: *Coveting is when you desire to have what your neighbor possesses and for him not to have it.* That second part is significant. It’s not just that we want something, but we also want someone else not to have it. It’s okay to admire something your neighbor has. If you see he got a nice new snow blower, you should be happy for him. You can even want one for yourself. You can say to him, “That’s a nice snow blower; where did you get it?” But it is not okay to say, “Oh, I see you got tricked into those fancy hand warmers. I heard they can electrocute you. I could trade you my trusty old one. You know, they don’t make ‘em like they used to.” Or even if you see that your neighbor found a good spouse, you can be happy for them. And you can also desire to have a husband or a wife, so long as you don’t seek to take someone else’s.

Coveting is very much related to envy. They’re not quite the same thing, but they are related. I heard another pastor define envy as “pain over someone else’s good fortune.” That’s really depraved. “Pain over someone else’s good fortune.” Have you ever experienced that? I bet you have. You never knew you wanted something, until you saw that someone else got it. And then it just vexes you that someone else has something you don’t have.

When I was a child, no one paid more attention to what my sister got for her birthday than I did. Our birthdays were sixteen days apart. I guess they still are. Hers was first. So I was always watching and playing my own version of “The Price Is Right” in my head. I would see what she got, add it all up, and remember it for sixteen days until my birthday came along. And my gifts needed to at least match hers. I kept track.

And, of course, we all did this at Christmas. I think kids everywhere do this. They count how many presents everyone gets, and they will notice any inequities. If everyone gets two presents, kids are okay with that. If everyone else gets two, and you get three, you’re okay with that too. But if you get four, and everyone else gets four, except one person gets five, then we have a problem. And this is really depraved. When everyone had two, we were fine. Now we have twice as much, but we’re upset because one person has just a little bit more. This reveals that it’s not really about the stuff, and it’s not really about the generosity of the giver, but it’s about having a higher status than someone else. That’s envy. We act like it’s about the stuff, but it’s really not.

Grownups do this too. Those who compare Christmas and birthday presents as children, grow up to argue about inheritances as adults. And it doesn’t matter how big the inheritance is. I’ve heard of just as many arguments over a few thousand dollars as I have over a few million.

We have a lot of envy in our world today. It occurs both among the rich and the poor, as well as everyone in between. Overall, we have more wealth than our ancestors could have ever

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dreamed of. But we're not happy with it. If anything, we have become more and more miserable. The rich have more than anyone in the world has ever had, but it's not really about what they have. It's more about having more than someone else. They could lose a third of their wealth in a stock market crash, but as long as they have more than everyone else, everything is fine. But if someone else passes them, that causes pain. To them, it's not about the actual stuff as much as it is about having more than someone else.

The poor commit the exact same sin, but instead of the key word being "more," the key word is "equity." The poor in our society have more wealth than almost anyone else in the history of the world. But they don't have the same wealth as the people ahead of them. They look at this and cry, "Unfair." And maybe it is. One way to get rich is by pushing others down. No doubt, some of the rich have done this, but they will get what's coming to them. But we often fail to see that we have everything we need, and we often fail to see that God has given us so much more than we really need, because we are fixated on those who have more. If the goal is equity, then no one in the world will ever be satisfied. Even if we could, by some miracle, achieve equity in this world, it would not last for more than two seconds, because one person would figure out how to have more, and the whole struggle would begin again. And if the goal is to have more than everyone else, at most, only one person will be satisfied, because everyone else will have at least one person they're still chasing. And the person at the top will live in fear, because everyone else is chasing him and trying to defeat him.

The rich and the poor commit the same sin. Whether you desire to have more than everyone else or the same as everyone else, it's the exact same sin. And the way of covetousness will always lead to disappointment.

In the gospel lesson, a man came to Jesus, asking him to tell his brother to divide the inheritance with him. The man wanted equity with his brother (Luke 12:13). Jesus refused, not because the man didn't have a case. I would bet that he did. But Jesus refused because the man's desires were wrong. Getting his share of the inheritance would not help him, not the way he needed to be helped. So Jesus said, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (12:15).

Then Jesus told the parable of a rich fool. He was a farmer, and his land "produced plentifully" (12:16). He had such a good crop that it actually became a problem for him. He didn't have enough space to store it. So he tore down his old barns in order to build bigger ones (12:18). He spent part of his wealth just so he could hold onto the rest of it. Part of the tragedy is that he had no one to share it with. Notice that he talks only to himself, and he only talks about his own needs. He says "I" six times and "my" four times. And the only time he uses the word "you" is when he's talking to his own soul. He says, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry" (12:19).

Then he died. He thought his life was in his own hands. It wasn't. It was in God's hands all along. And that very night, the soul he thought he was protecting, was taken from him. So God said, "And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (12:20). The man probably didn't even know, because he was alone, and he cared only about himself. But even if he did know, he didn't care. It wasn't him anymore. All his coveting got him nowhere. He trusted in his stuff instead of the one true God, and that, really, is the essence of coveting.

The Ninth and Tenth Commandments really bring us back around to the First Commandment, where the LORD says, "You shall have no other gods before me."

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In Colossians 3:5, the apostle Paul defines coveting as idolatry. That's really the best definition. Coveting is idolatry. To covet means that we seek happiness, security, fulfillment, meaning, protection, or salvation in something other than the one true God. We look at our neighbor's property, and we say to ourselves, "If only I had that, then I would be happy and secure." Or we look at our friend's spouse, and we say to ourselves, "If only I could find someone like that, then I would be complete." We treat these things and people like gods. We trust in them. We fear what will happen if we fail to obtain them or if we lose them. And we love them. And when I say that we "love them," I mean that we serve them. We devote ourselves to them and we work to get them. They capture our affections, and our actions follow in service to them. We take all these things or people that we think will satisfy, and we treat them like gods. It's idolatry.

With all of the commandments so far, we have identified the sins they prohibit and the gifts they protect. Every commandment protects some good gift that God has given to us. And when we recognize these, we see that the commandments are not bad, but they are actually good for us. God prohibits sin in order to protect his gifts to us. The sin is usually pretty easy to identify, and it's no different here. The word is in the commandment. The Ninth and Tenth Commandments prohibit coveting.

But what gift do these commandments protect? The Ninth and Tenth Commandments protect God's gift of contentment. Instead of coveting after everything we don't have, we should be content with what God has given us. And this contentment doesn't really come from looking at the stuff God has given us, adding it all up, and concluding that it is enough. If we look at the stuff, we will never be content. Or if we do, for a moment, feel content with it, it's only an illusion, because all the stuff can be stripped away in a moment. True contentment comes when we see that we have a provider. He knows every hair on our heads (Matt. 10:30; Luke 12:7), he has bound himself to give us our daily bread for as long as we live on this earth (Matt. 6:11; Luke 11:3), and when our days on earth are ended, he will receive us into his glorious kingdom. True contentment can only be found in the one true God. We can trust him to provide us with everything we need in this life and the next.

So as much as the Ninth and Tenth Commandments repeat the Sixth and Seventh, even more so, they bring us back to the First Commandment. And in doing so, they illustrate that all of the commandments are rooted in the First Commandment. Why do we misuse the LORD's Name? Because we do not fear, love, and trust in him above all things. Why do we profane the Sabbath? Because we think we need to take care of ourselves instead of trusting the rest God provides. Why do we dishonor our parents and other authorities? Because we chafe against the one true authority. Why do we murder or cause harm to our neighbors? Because we do not recognize the image of God in them. Why do we commit adultery? Because we do not trust God to give us a spouse. Why do we steal? Because we do not trust God to provide for our material needs. Why do we lie or slander? Because we do not trust God to bring forth justice or reward the truth. Why do we covet? Because we do not trust God to provide, protect, and save us. And there are many more ways that we could link any of the commandments back to the First Commandment. It always goes back to the First Commandment. We should have no other gods before him. And to have a God means that we fear that thing, we love it, and we trust it. "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things" (Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, "The Ten Commandments").

The rest of the commandments flow from the First: "You shall have no other gods before me." And what gift does the First Commandment protect? It protects God's gift of himself.

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When God gave the Ten Commandments, before he even got to the First Commandment, he identified himself as the God of Israel. The First Word was, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex. 20:2). The people of Israel were not given these commandments as a way of pleasing God. It’s not as if God said, “If you do this, you will become my people.” No. First, he adopted them as his people. The commandments, then, are his will for how the people should live.

The Exodus from Egypt is the great redemption story in the Old Testament. God rescued the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, and so they became his people. He gave himself to them to be their God.

And this looked forward to something even greater. The great deliverance story of the New Testament is the sacrificial death of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. This is how he purchased a people for himself. He redeemed us. “He bought [us] and freed [us] from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with silver and gold, but with His holy and precious blood and with His innocent sufferings and death” (Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, “The Apostles’ Creed”). The gift is God himself. Jesus gave himself for us, and he gives himself to us. He gave himself for us in order to redeem us, and he gives himself to us as our God. “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:31-32).

Think about that. Consider what God gave to get you. Consider what Jesus suffered to redeem you. Do you really need to covet whatever your neighbor has that you want? Do you really need to worry about your daily bread? You might still worry. In fact, you probably will. But you don’t have to. And you don’t have to compare yourself to your neighbor. Maybe you don’t have as much. Maybe the world does love them more than it loves you. Doesn’t matter. You have a Father in heaven who gives his entire Kingdom to you (Luke 12:32). You have a Savior who gave his own life for you. You have the Holy Spirit, with you and in you.

You have the Triune God. He’s the gift. Everything we have in this life is from him, so we can rejoice in those things. And when he gives good things to our neighbors, we can rejoice for them too. We don’t just have the gifts. We have the Giver, and in him, we have contentment. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.