

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Tonight, at Matt's suggestion, we begin a new series on the 'ten commandments'. Unfortunately Matt is away today, so it has been left to me to introduce them.

The Ten Commandments are God's *"basics for living"*.

Indeed, they are so basic, that the Jews used to call them as *"the 10 words"*.

In our Bibles today the 10 commandments are spread over some 17 verses. Although some of the commandments are brief, others are pretty wordy.

However, almost certainly *originally the 10 commandments were 10 short pithy statements*: what has happened is that the 10 commandments, as we find them in Ex 20 & Deut 5, *have been elaborated upon* - first place by Moses & then by others too - and that is the way it should be.

In every age & in every society the basics need to be applied in differing ways.

It makes little sense in our society, for instance, to speak about coveting another man's slaves, cattle or donkeys - the last thing I would want is another man's donkey. But the underlying principle of not coveting remains in force.

Alas, *the 10 commandments* have had a bad press.

It doesn't help that with the exception of the commands to keep the sabbath day holy and to honour parents, the commandments are all in the negative: "Don't do this" and "Don't do that". They *seem to breathe the spirit of the kill joy*.

The truth is the very reverse. In the words of a former American President, Thomas Woodrow Wilson: *"The commands of God are all designed to make us more happy than we can possibly be without them"*

The negativity of the commandments is simply an indication that they deal with the outer limits of conduct - this is the boundary beyond which we cannot go.

By keeping the commandments we have not reached absolute perfection - the 10 commandments are just the very minimum God requires.

The fact = *we cannot do without laws*.

To survive on the road we need laws. Where would we be if it were left to our individual whim as to whether we drove on the left or right hand side of the road, whether we stopped at red lights or at green lights.

Road traffic laws are essential for our survival.

Similarly, to survive on the road of life, we need laws too.

We have only one life to live.

One serious mistake, and we can mess up if not ruin that life.

GK Chesterton had a serious point when he wrote: *"Man cannot break the laws of God, he can only break himself against it"*.

We may think that we can get away with it by living life on our terms, but at the end of the day we are the ones who are the losers.

The Psalmist wrote: **"Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God'"** (Ps 14.1).

It is only fools who think they are big enough and smart enough to violate the unchangeable laws of the eternal God and get away with it. The truth is we cannot.

So with this in mind, let's turn to the 10 commandments, and in particular to the tenth commandment.

Incidentally, I don't quite understand why, but Matt thought it would be helpful for us to go through them in the reverse order – perhaps because in this way on Father's Day we will arrive at the command to honour our father & our mother!

COMMANDMENT NO.10: DO NOT COVET

Or in the words of the GNB: **“Do not desire another man's house; do not desire his wife, his slaves, his cattle, his donkeys, or anything else that he owns” (Ex 20.17)**

“Do not covet”, says God.

But unfortunately most of us do covet. Not perhaps our neighbour's slave – nor indeed his cattle nor his donkeys – but perhaps our neighbour's house; perhaps our neighbour's Jaguar or Porsche.

The fact is that most of us are never truly satisfied with what we have.

The multi-millionaire John D. Rockefeller was asked, *“How much money does it take for a person to be really happy?”* He replied: *“Just a little bit more”*.

Courtesy of American Express, Visa & Mastercard covetousness is now made easy. In the words of one advertising slogan, credit cards *“take the waiting out of wanting”*. As a result, as an average we now owe £10,000 on our cards.

But money doesn't buy everything – it certainly doesn't buy happiness.

The German tennis star, Boris Becker, once said this: *“I have won Wimbledon twice before, once as the youngest player. I was rich. I had all the material possessions I needed – money, cars, women, everything. I know that this is a cliché, it's the old song from the movie and pop stars who commit suicide. They have everything, and yet they are so unhappy. I had no inner peace”*.

Poor Boris. He should have read his Bible. In the words of Eccl 5.10: **“If you love money, you will never be satisfied; if you long to be rich, you will never get all you want”**.

The fact is that what we covet never delivers what we think it promises.

J. John in his book on the 10 Commandments quotes the following piece of home-spun truth:

Money can buy medicine, but it cannot buy health

Money can buy a house, but not a home.

Money can buy companionship, but not friendship

Money can buy entertainment, but not happiness

Money can buy food, but not appetite

Money can buy a bed, but not sleep

I.e. trying to keep up with the Jones' is an unprofitable exercise.

For even if we gain what we covet we never gain fulfilment.

As the 19th century German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, once said: coveting *“is like sea water; the more we drink, the thirstier we become”*.

When God gave commandment no.10, he gave it for our good.

For covetousness leads nowhere. Or if it leads anywhere, it leads to disputes of one kind or another. In the words of Jas 4.1-2: **“Where do all the fights and quarrels among you come from? They come from your desires for pleasure, which are constantly fighting within you. You want things, but you cannot have them, so you are ready to kill; you strongly desire things, but you cannot get them, so you quarrel and fight”**

What then should we do?

How can we deal with this spirit of covetousness which affects so many of us? I believe that the best corrective is to follow the advice Jesus gave on the Sermon on the Mount:

Matt 6.19-21: **"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth & rust consume and where thieves break in & steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth or rust consumes & where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also".**

Peterson: *"Don't hoard treasure down here where it gets eaten by moths and corroded by rust or - worse! - stolen by burglars. Stockpile treasure in heaven, where it's safe from moth and rust and burglars. It's obvious, isn't it? The place where your treasure is. is the place you will most want to be, and end up being".*

Jesus offers two strategies, the one negative and the other positive:

1. DON'T CENTRE YOUR LIFE AROUND THIS WORLD'S GOODS

- ***Don't centre your life around things that the moth can destroy***
In the East part of a person's wealth often consisted in fine or elaborate clothes. E.g. in 2 Kgs 5 we read of Gehazi, Elisha's servant, who wished to make some forbidden profit out of Naaman, after his master had cured him. He asked for **"a talent of silver and two changes of fine clothes"** (2 Kings 5.22). JX says: *"Beware... it's only going to attract the moth. It won't last the test of time"*
- ***Don't centre your life around things that can rust destroy.***
Rust can destroy the most solid of objects – as car owners often find to their horror. Actually it is questionable whether Jesus was referring to "rust". The underlying Greek word (*brosis*) = lit. *"eating away"*. In the East many a person's wealth consisted in the corn/grain they had stored away in their great barns - some have suggested that JX was warning against rats/mice/worms/other vermin which could get into the granary & eat away the grain.
- ***Don't centre your life around things that thieves can steal.***
Today most of us put whatever "wealth" we may have into bank accounts - alternatively we invest the money in PEPS and in stocks & shares. But in Jesus' day the normal thing = to hide your money in your house. Jesus therefore said: *"Beware of thieves breaking in (lit: digging through) & stealing"*. Breaking in & entering was even easier in 1C Palestine than in 20C Britain. For in 1C Palestine the walls of many houses made of nothing stronger than baked clay - to gain entry into such a house a burglar didn't have to break a lock - all he

had to do was to dig through and steal.

Such warnings initially seem very remote to us.

Our situation = so very different from the kind of situation in which JX & his contemporaries found themselves.

Nobody in their right mind would today invest in clothes - none of us here has great barns full of corn - & by & large we don't keep a nest-egg under the mattress.

And yet in spite of the inevitable differences between our day & JX's day the general sense = v.clear. JX was saying

Don't centre your life

- ***on things you wear.***

Ladies (& maybe gentlemen too), what would Jesus have to say about your extensive wardrobes? And what would Jesus have to say about the way in which we throw out clothes, not because they are threadbare, but simply because they are no longer fashionable

- ***on the hardware you buy.*** Men (& maybe ladies too) what would JX have to say about the money we spend on cars, sound systems, satellite & cable TV, home computers, & the 1001 gadgets we have around the house? These things never last very long - not so much because of the rust, but because of the built in obsolescence.

- ***on the money you are saving*** - whether in the bank/building society or wherever. Money doesn't last - indeed, thanks to inflation it rapidly loses its value

Don't centre your life around this world's goods.

Instead, take some positive action:

2. INVEST WISELY FOR THE FUTURE

v20: **"Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal"**

What are these treasures?

The Jews used to say that the deeds of kindness which a people did upon earth were their treasure in heaven.

There was a famous story which the Rabbis used to tell about a certain King Monobaz of Adiabene, who became a convert to Judaism:

*"Monobaz distributed all his treasures to the poor in the year of famine. His brothers sent for him and said, 'Your fathers gathered treasures, & added to those of their fathers, but you have dispersed yours and theirs'. Monobaz said to them, 'My fathers gathered treasures for below, I have gathered treasures for above; they stored treasures in a place over which the hand of man can rule, but I have stored treasures in a place over which the hand of man cannot rule; my fathers collected treasures which bear no interest, I have gathered treasures which bear interest; my fathers gathered treasures of money, but **I have gathered treasures in souls**; my fathers gathered treasures for others, I have gathered treasures for myself; my fathers gathered treasures in this world, I have gathered treasures for the world to come"*

OK there may be an element of the doctrine of works here. By contrast JX preached a gospel of grace, not of merit. But the main parallel is clear: as Monobaz invested in people, so are we - such investment brings treasure in heaven. Jesus calls us to centre our lives around others - and not around ourselves. He calls us to centre the use of our money around others - and not around ourselves.

Jesus went on: "**For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also**"

Sit down and look coolly at your current expenditure - and ask yourself if your life centres around yourself, or around the Kingdom of God.

- How much have you spent on eating out recently?
 - Or for that matter, how much did you spend on your weekend shop this week?
 - How much have you spent on going to a show or to a concert?
 - How much did you spend on that weekend break?
 - How much will you be spending on that summer holiday
- And how does this compare to what you give to God?

If we are honest, many of us are hypocrites.

We say to God: "*Sorry God, I love you very much, but I just can't afford to upgrade my giving - I just can't afford to tithe*", and yet the reality all too often may be very different.

Perhaps some of us need to conduct an audit of our income and expenditure and assess where in fact our priorities lie.

JX said: "**Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also**" (Peterson: *The place where your treasure is. is the place you will most want to be, and end up being*).

On another occasion Jesus urged his disciples to "**Take care, be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions**" (Lk 12.15).

Don't be deceived by the world and its values - don't give in to the temptation to keep up with the Jones' - don't give in to the pressures of the advertizers - question the assumption that the more we have the better off we are....

For the fact is that covetousness does not enhance life - but ultimately destroys life.

Don't centre your life around this world's goods

Rather invest wisely in the future!