

The St. John's Pulpit

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CRAVING SIMPLICITY

Exodus 20:17; Psalm 103:1-5; Joel 2:21-27; Matthew 6:24-34

The Tenth Commandment in Our Summer Sermon Series
The Ten Commandments for the 21st Century: The Calling of Wisdom

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 20, 2017
The Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister



Would you like to understand the will of God more clearly? A few months ago, a fine fellow asked, *“How can I know the will of God?”* I affirmed him for desiring to follow God’s will. Then, I asked what he knew about God’s will that he was seeking to follow now. He thought for a moment before offering an excellent answer: *“Well, The Ten Commandments; Jesus teachings, “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; Love your neighbor as you need to be loved; It is more blessed to give than to receive;” and “Do to others as you want them to do to you.”* I saw visions of the young lawyer who came to Jesus with a similar question. I said, *“Very good; You already know the will of God. Do what you’ve described.”* He said, *“Well, I know what God’s will is for everyone; I am wanting to know God’s will for me.”* I smiled, *“You are part of everyone. Then I proclaimed, “God’s will is simple; you are making God’s will difficult.”*

Beloved, the will of God is not a mystery. The will of God is clear and has been revealed to humanity in many ways. An early Christian letter to scattered Hebrew pilgrims begins with these words: *“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways..., but in recent days, God has spoken to us by a Son”* (Hebrews 1:1-2). Jesus incarnated the will of God; he fleshed out the will of God. Each of his teachings and relational expressions of his humanity pulled back the veil for you to know more clearly the will of God. Jesus shows you God’s desires for you. Jesus taught us to *‘Seek first the reign of God in your lives,’* and is quoted to have said, *“Whoever does the will of God is my brother or sister”* (Mark 3:35).

This summer, we have reconsidered the will of God as revealed in Ten Commandments. We have applied these ancient principles to our lives. Today, we do not so much come to the end of the list as much as we come full circle back to the 1st Commandment.

The 10th Commandment, “*You shall not covet...*” brings us full circle back to “*You shall have no other gods before Me.*” You are to desire God above all other desires. (A couple of weeks ago, I enjoyed a beautiful mountain home of some friends where I unpacked twelve boxes and bags of books, files and journals for a week of uninterrupted study and prayer. Their home was so nice that I told them I was glad I had not yet preached on coveting.)

To ‘covet’ means ‘to see and desire; to fix attention upon.’ When you see and desire anything or anyone that precludes God from being your first desire, then you have disobeyed the 1st and 10th Commandments – and turned your back on God’s will. You can be possessed by your possessions. Covetousness describes a potential possession possessing you before you possess it. And if a potential possession possesses you before you possess it to the point that it interferes with your desiring of God and the ways of God, then you don't need it. Jesus taught, “*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*” (Matthew 6:21); Your focus becomes your life. Therefore, Jesus said, “*You cannot serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth*” (Matthew 6:24).

Beloved, God created you to have desires. Jesus blesses you for hungering and thirsting for the ways of God. You are to diligently ask, seek and knock as you relate with God. Early Christian writings taught people to covet or desire what strengthens and sustains the community. As you worship God and express active faith, you covet (desire) the Lordship of God in your life and in the life of the world. Jesus said, “*The pure in heart see God.*” Purity of heart is to seek God.

A rabbi was asked, “*If God does not want us to desire or enjoy all these blessings God created, why not just destroy them?*” The rabbi responded, “*Do you want God to destroy everything? People worship the sun, moon, stars, one another and on and on. God desires for you to enjoy all the blessings and God expects you to have multiple loyalties; God only asks that you NOT put any commitment, relationship or desire ahead of your commitment to your relationship with God or your desire for the ways of God.*”

There can be a direct relationship between desire and worry. Worry can eclipse faith. The prophet Joel proclaimed God’s faithfulness during years of drought, disease and suffering. As the

people worried, Joel described fertile soil, green pastures, fruitful trees and ample blessings. Jesus taught that worry creates covetousness if it becomes the focus of a person's life. Worry and fear can get in the way of faithful living. Jesus teaches us to learn from birds and flowers.

Recently, I rediscovered a prayer of Thomas 'a Kempis: "*Lord, grant that I may be one with you in choosing and in rejecting, that I may be unable to choose or reject except as you would do.*" This prayer is one we could all memorize and use to mature in discipleship.

Today, upward mobility is our life-style. Desiring MORE than we need has become a disease. **The cure for the spiritual disease of covetousness is to desire a maturing relationship with God so deeply that you cannot be bothered or interrupted by a desire for anything else.**

A few years ago, I saw a coffee table book showing families from all around the world. Each family represented different cultures, nations and socio-economics. The only thing similar in the many photos was that each family had set every item that was in their house or apartment outside. As you can imagine, most families of the world did not have too much to bring outside.

When Wayne Oates and his wife were in their seminary years, they served a church which required them to drive on Saturday and stay overnight with a church family. One Saturday evening about 8:00, following a wonderful dinner and some visiting, the farmer asked his guests, "*Are you young folks feeling okay?*" "*Yes,*" they replied. "*Do you need anything else to eat or can we get you anything?*" "*No, we are just fine,*" said the Oates. "*Well, okay then,*" said the farmer as he and his wife stood from their chairs, "*this is our bedtime, so we will leave the lights to you. If you need anything at all, just make yourselves at home. If you look for anything and we don't have it, let us know and we will come downstairs to help you understand how we live without it.*"

When I visited Kenya, I heard about a young woman from Lake Norman, NC. She had worked all summer in the orphanage in Nairobi. She became close friends with a girl named Lulu. When the young woman returned to Lake Norman, her father surprised her with a new car for her junior year at UNC Chapel Hill. The young woman thanked her father and then refused the gift saying, "*If Lulu doesn't need it, I don't need it either.*" After graduating Chapel Hill, the young woman became a missionary to Kenya for three years. Her father showed up at the chaplain's office at Chapel Hill complaining about how they had put these idealistic thoughts in her head. The chaplain listened and then said, "*You really need to express your anger toward God; for it is*

God who has offered your daughter this vision for her life. Through her pursuit of economic social status, she has become entangled in complexity. God has unveiled to her a life of faith-oriented humility and a commitment to service. She is craving simplicity.”

Beloved, the will of God is clear. You do not need to sell your car and move to Kenya. But, you do need to ‘Strive for, covet, desire God and God’s ways, and you will enjoy all God’s other blessings the way God desires for you to enjoy them.’ When you pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven...,” you focus upon, see and desire your lives and your community to look like God’s vision for us and God’s vision for the world. When Jesus prayed, “Not my will, but Your will be done,” he was teaching you that God’s will is simple to know and understand – but it requires prayerful and faithful commitment for you to crave God’s simplicity. Jesus taught more than ‘don’t worry – be happy.’ Jesus taught, ‘don’t worry; don’t be afraid. Find rest in God’s hands by craving simplicity.’

Amen and AMEN!