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The One About Spouses, Houses & Donkeys

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Exodus 20:1-17

[The Ten Commandments]

Then God spoke all these words: ²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³You shall not murder. ¹⁴You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵You shall not steal. ¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

How do you work with not having that which you really, really want? How do you carry the unfulfilled desires of your hearts, especially the ones that go unfulfilled for years and years and years? Desires that are just ordinary realities for other people, for people who aren't smarter than you, who don't work harder than you, people whose lives just seem easier, less stressful, more manageable. Who seem to get way more than their fair share of breaks? *Why them and not me, God?*

For our final week in the Ten Commandments, just this one:

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s spouse. (It lends itself to Dr. Seuss, doesn’t it?) You shall not covet your neighbor’s male servant; you shall not covet his female servant; you shall not covet your neighbor’s ox or his donkey; you shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

Unlike commandments 6, 8 and 9 which are straightforward – do not kill, steal and lie – for covet, Moses gets very specific: house, spouse, male servant, female servant, ox, donkey, or anything else! Why? Maybe because absolutely anything can be coveted. And maybe, because the most coveted things aren't usually *things* at all.

What non-things have you known other people to covet?

- A job promotion;
- Athletic ability;
- Someone else's talent;
- Date to the prom;
- College acceptance letter;
- Someone else's family;
- Different personality.

I want to imagine *Houses, Spouses, and Donkeys* as the three wells from which all coveting is drawn. *Houses* includes the material things that rightfully belong to others. *Spouses* includes all the relationships that rightfully belong to others. And *Donkeys*. . . .

What about *donkeys*? Back in the day, and in parts of the world still, livestock – ox and donkeys – were an indicator of personal worth. Not just personal wealth, but *personal worth*. Indicators like your job, your title, your reputation, the power of the position you hold – those are your donkeys. Your airline status can be. Carl has Delta platinum, which means when I fly with him I get a big comfy seat and better snacks. Without him I am in the middle seat of row 25. Your credit score. How about gender, race, nationality, legacy? My kids have double legacies from Arkansas State University, one from IU. All those non-material, but oh-so-real, things that make some people's lives SO much different than others. Those are the donkeys. The donkeys that are so much more than donkeys.

To keep ALL the commandments, we must learn that only God is God. That our lives are to be spent in service to our neighbor. And third, to live at peace with, to be satisfied with, to take joy in, what houses, spouses, and donkeys already belong to you or to me. The houses and spouses and donkeys that rightfully reside within the boundaries of your own life and mine. Which is not to say nothing new will ever come to us, but that we do not mentally, emotionally, spiritually *stalk*, and take possession of, the houses, spouses, and donkeys that rightfully belong to others.

Is any of this familiar? – *She’s so lucky to be married. I can NOT believe she doesn’t treat her wife better. If I were the department chair/principal/pastor, I would NEVER do, blah, blah, blah.* Conjecturally doing someone else’s job, raising someone else’s kid, caring for someone else’s house – it’s all covetous behavior. The failure to stay at home mentally, emotionally, spiritually, when God is trying to get something done in my life. I call it *learning to live inside*

my own house. Altogether inside, keeping my heart, my mind, my soul, and my strength (that is, my body) inside my own life.

I know how easy it is to say, it would be easier if I weren't so easily distractible . . . and if Empire weren't forever butting in. You remember Empire, how the Hebrews ended up at Mt. Sinai in the first place in need of this covenant, these ten commandments; how Egypt enslaved them, by reshaping the geo-political-economy of the time so they, the Hebrews – just people trying to get along in the world – ended up dependent upon Egypt, dependent upon Empire for everything, ended up slaves to the Empire?

Empire still works the same. A friend told me recently her daughter who is two years into a career in her major is a little disillusioned. *"It seems like I only go to work to pay bills,"* she said. Empire's quest is that we indebt ourselves to it, ever blurring the difference between what we have and what we need, then offering a line of credit that ends up selling away our future: future money, future time, future life already spent. By the time the new day comes, what we bought last year no long satisfies. Three years ago when we were planning a wedding, I learned that bridal stores now offer *free financing for a year.* Financing a wedding dress?

Not to use the word frivolously, but debt is its own form of slavery. And nothing breeds covetousness more effectively than feeling trapped in one's own life. Theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas has a lovely little book called *The Character of Virtue* in which he defines optimism as *making the best of a life you basically don't like.* Too often, Hauerwas writes, *optimism* is confused with *hope.* *Hope* is a Christian virtue, but *optimism* is not. *Hope* believes that good is possible when right patience is found. *Hope* believes God has made it possible to find this life of mine to be full of goodness, full of grace, full of joy. But I will only ever find it by staying put and looking for it here.

If my neighbors' houses, spouses, and donkeys are all I ever think about, if I'm forever rooting through their lives and wishing what they have was mine, how will I ever know what God might be doing in this heart, mind, soul, and body? As one person said at Bible study this week, *covetousness is an inside job* – one we do for ourselves, because we want the full measure of freedom that comes with being God's own people. What my neighbor does with his house and spouse and donkeys is between him and God. God isn't going to work with me on it.

In the meantime, I'm the one choosing not to be at home, to miss what God wants to deliver to my porch, to be gone from the life God deemed right for me. And however tempting it is to squeeze onto the judgment seat with God and help God see what would be the far better distribution plan for all the possessions, relationships, and donkeys of the universe, that is not a job to which I have been promoted. Nor you.

Over and over and over again in the scriptures, God reminds faithful people – Job, for example – that how God does business is God's business. My business is to live in my house, stewarding the stuff in my care, according to God's will. For the good of my neighbors. Fidelity. Holiness. Justice.

Hey God, we might say on an especially needy day, How come my neighbor/ sister/ brother has it so much better than me? So, that's a theological question: why is God the way God is? Which God answers over and over in the Bible by saying, because I AM. I AM the one who brought you out of the house of slavery, promised to provide for you and keep you free. And here's how it's going to work.

1. Don't make other beings into gods.
2. Don't make things into gods.
3. Don't use my name for anything but me – I AM.
4. Keep the Sabbath.
5. Respect the elders.
6. Don't murder.
7. Don't do adultery.
8. Don't steal.
9. Don't lie.
10. Don't covet your neighbor's house, spouse or donkey.

Our question is not so much theological as incarnational: How shall we live? Do we or do we not want to be free? If we do, then we know what we are called to do and how we are called to spend these lives of ours:

Staying put – that's fidelity;
doing God's will – that's holiness;
for our neighbor's good – that's justice.

Fidelity. Holiness. And Justice. Would you pray with me?