

# Let's Practice What We Preach (Decalogue)

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## **Prayer**

*Reconciling God, thank you for bringing what we say and do into alignment. When we are tempted to covet that which belongs to others, stop us, please. Give us strength and courage to be in community with and for one another wherever you have called and planted us. Amen.*

## **Scripture**

Exodus 20:17

## **Context**

One African American colloquialism is, "What GOD has for me is for me." It is meant remind people that you don't have to worry about others taking anything from you nor do should you be concerned or envious of the trappings or materials that others may own. This is inherently true but if only it were that simple.

## **Exegesis**

The tenth commandment of the Decalogue is a reminder of Yahweh's ability to provide for the people that are a part of the covenant. Yet there maybe conditions that preclude some of GOD's children from feeling the confidence and being able to exhibit the trust that is necessary to remain in a covenantal relationship.

There is an often overlooked or lesser-known story in the Bible about a man who coveted his neighbor's belongings. 1 Kings 21:2-3 records the story of King Ahab and Naboth. The chapter opens up with the following: Ahab said to Naboth, "Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth. But Naboth replied, "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors." The story ends in the death of Nahob. After the Jezebel, Ahab's wife found a couple of people who were willing to make false testimony against Nahob. Apparently Ahab's parents did not instill into him, "If it is not yours don't touch it!" Ironically Ahab had no scarcity of resources. He was the King. It seems his privilege assisted him in feeling entitled to his neighbor's land. This privilege and greed also cost him his life.

## **Conversation**

In the post civil war era of America many sharecroppers were promised land and stripped of it because of land owner's greed and privilege. What does it mean to have your future plundered because those who have more wealth than you want the little that you have? One would think that those who covet would be

those who were suffering or had less but the story of Ahab debunks that assumption. Another and more familiar story about coveting can be found in the story of David and Bathsheba as depicted in 1 Samuel 11. David had the power and the privilege in this case. He had more than one wife but desired or coveted that which he saw, Bathsheba and wanted her by any means necessary. The consequences were catastrophic for David and Uriah, Bathsheba's husband. While there may be poor people who will break the law because they desire the social and material trappings of others one could surmise that what they really want is equity and a chance to acquire their own basic provisions.

While many rich people want more could it be that poor and marginalized groups just want basic provisions. The Hebrew word used in Exodus 20:17 is *chamed*, to desire. Is it possible that what some have seen as coveting is merely a desire to have equal access to healthcare, quality education, low interest rate loans, a living wage and to live in a low violence neighborhood? This is not to negate the Law or to dismiss Yahweh's intent when introducing the law, but if the Church began to analyze and work to offset the inequities that exist for the people that they serve would that be a form of fulfilling the law?

### Questions

1. Is it possible that the role is not to pronounce punishment for those who break laws but to assist in dismantling the systems that cause or create conditions that tempt people to break laws?
2. While there will continue to be those who violate laws one hallmark of the culture of African Americans is to survive under enormous pressure and to create something out of nothing. The Church and church leadership have an enormous opportunity to foster environments of trust and to model behavior that is not covetous in nature. In an itinerant system, often a covetous spirit exists amongst clergy; after all, moving up requires someone else moving up or out. This commandment provides an exercise in practicing what you preach. What if all pastors viewed their current assignment as enough? What if all congregants view their current pastor as enough? What keeps us from seeing one another, ourselves, and our current circumstances as enough – even while making room for improvement?
3. What would it look like and what would need to change within us for the covenant with God to be sufficient and the desire to move up to a higher ranked church, to have a bigger budget, or to have an enormous sanctuary were not factors in the pursuit of ministry?
4. When clergy have coveted their neighbor's church, what kind of impact has that had on the laity?
5. How might The Church seek to model obedience not just to this commandment but also to each of the Ten Commandments?
6. Was there a time in your life that you coveted something that belonged to your neighbor? What were the consequences?
7. Can you name other ways in which churches or leaders exhibit covetous behavior or have been complicit in fostering such behavior?
8. In addition to materials and spouses what else have we individually or collectively coveted?