



Title	⇒ The Truly Happy Person (10 Commandments Series)
Scripture	Exodus 20: 1-17; Psalm 23
Minister	The Reverend Matthew Ruttan
Place	Westminster Presbyterian Church, Barrie, ON
Date	November 27 th , 2011
Calendar	1 st Sunday of Advent (Honouring Elders Service; Welcoming New Members)
Note	This text is an approximate rendering

Minister: Peace be with you
Congregation: And also with you



Here is what it says in Exodus, chapter 20, the great passage on the 10 Commandments on which we have been focussing for the past several months: *“Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery... You shall not steal... You shall not covet...”*

And then from the familiar Psalm 23: *“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”*

In 1983 Canadian singer song-writer Bruce Cockburn release an album called *The Trouble with Normal*. It's beautiful: carefully crafted and thought-proving as so many of Cockburn's albums are. The second song on that album is called “The Candy Man's Gone.”¹ Here is what he sings in verse three:

*Who is the Candy Man?
In the bar, in the senate, in the alley, in the study
Pimping dreams of riches for everybody
Something for nothing, new lamps for old
And the streets will be platinum, never mind gold
Well hey, pass it on
Misplaced your faith and the Candy Man's gone
I hate to tell you but the Candy Man's gone*

But who is this Candy Man? It seems that the Candy Man is the all-pervasive ethos in much of our culture, promising, as Brian Walsh describes, “a life of abundance, wealth and ‘riches for everybody.’”² But Cockburn sings, the Candy Man's *gone*—which, I think, is kind of like a way of saying, that the promise is hollow. False. A let down to those of us with eyes. Empty. Vacuous. Deceptive. Dead.

Or is it?



Today is the second last Sunday for our 10 Commandments series. We have covered a lot of ground. Ground that is both high and low—smooth but sometimes muddy. It is inevitably so. It is inevitably so because, as I highlighted as we began this journey together, we are seeking a certain passageway in this world—an illuminated pathway—of *moral vision*. Moral vision. And if that is what we are after, then we must be prepared to be challenged a bit here and there. Or a lot here and there. For when it comes to moral vision, all

of us need glasses. And that's not something I say to make us feel down about ourselves; it's simply a comment on reality. Our glasses are Scripture. We need glasses; because without them—without Scripture—we are lost in an otherwise blurry world of jack-in-the-box morality, which is to say: unsteady, unpredictable, and geared toward those who have yet to think through the larger ethical implications of this thing called life before God.

So this morning we approach two commands: number 8 and number 10. (Number 9 is reserved for our final week.) Number 8 goes like this: “You shall not steal.” And number 10 goes like this: “You shall not covet.” And just to be clear the word “covet”—*hamad*—really means to desire or crave. And it goes on from there to say, “You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.” Suffice it to say, this is ancient wording, so let me offer a linguistic update, taking us perhaps up to Windows7: “You shall not desire your neighbour’s house; you shall not desire your neighbour’s spouse; or those who work for them, or job, or car, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.” All of a sudden the old words sound incredibly contemporary.

I treat these two commands together for two reasons. The first is a very practical consideration: we’re running out of time. Advent is upon us—and with the smell of hot chocolate in our noses and shimmer of Advent candles dancing before us, we want to transition into the time of anticipating the arrival of the infant Jesus. Mary is in her third trimester, so we need to start thinking about that.

The second reason is that these two commands are closely related. John Calvin, one of the great thinkers of the 1500’s who had a huge impact on culture and Protestant thought, said that one leads to the other. When we desire the things that belong to someone else, the next step is to become obsessed with it. From there, we make a plan to obtain it even if it seems to go against what we think is right, or maybe even what we think God thinks is right; and next thing you know the mental train and inner desires of our hearts are picking up speed down the tracks of temptation—and then, we take it. $1 + 1 = 2$.

Now I’m not assuming that any of us are thieves. But the issue is more complicated than that, as it has been with all of our commandments. When I began thinking about the moral complexities of these commands one of the first things that came to mind was Robin Hood. What if we’re stealing from the rich to give to the poor? What if those rich got their money by cheating? In terms of my own life, what if I just fudge the numbers a little bit on my taxes? What about that stay in the hotel by the airport and when I got home discovered that nice towel in my suitcase, How’d that get there?... What about land that may never have been up for grabs in the first place? What’s big and what’s small?

Someone I know was in an airport in Buffalo, New York, and there was a youngish person selling papers. He left a stack of them and carried some of them under his arm, selling papers. He went over to greet a group just getting off a flight. A man, a well-dressed man, graying at the temples saw the boy turn his back on the little stack that was left, and he picked up one, leaving no dollar bill. This is the U.S. remember, so there is still such a thing as a \$1 bill. Under his arm it went, and he walked away. “Ah—a dollar. Don’t make a big deal,” my friend thought. “Here, here’s five dollars, don’t make a big deal out of it.” He gave it to the boy out of guilt for the other. A dollar. How small.

Well, he followed this guy into the cafeteria lineup. He was awfully slow, just poking along, so he got to watching his tray as well as his own. They came to those little containers of butter—what do they cost, twenty-five cents? He took one, lifted a saucer and put it under there. And when he went by the cashier, he didn’t pay. That’s only 25 cents—I mean, come on, now. I guess it’s no big deal, he thought. My friend later reflected on the whole series of events like this: In the courtroom it’s a dollar or 25 cents, but in character, it’s a felony.³ It’s kind of like that old story of a man who worked on a ship being built in the harbour. There was a hunk of wood that was a bit rotted, but he nailed it on anyhow. Today she’s in the bottom of the lake. What’s small ain’t so small.

But the even deeper problem with the command “You shall not steal,” is that it leads us back to that other command, “You shall not desire.” I’ll tell you, it’s a hard thing to not desire. Just look around at this consumer culture. We get bombarded with messages day in and day out. Remember Cockburn’s song?

*In the bar, in the senate, in the alley, in the study
Pimping dreams of riches for everybody
Something for nothing, new lamps for old
And the streets will be platinum, never mind gold
Well hey, pass it on*

I tried an experiment the other day. I lead a worship service at Woods Park every fourth Thursday of the month at 2:30 in the afternoon. As I got in my car after the service, I decided to see how many advertisements came at me as I went home. How many times was I given a sales pitch by some company or person saying ‘Hey, buy me!’ It was a 6 kilometre ride and took me 11 minutes. If a sign just had a name and a number I didn’t count it. But if there was some sort of pitch to get me to give them business, I counted it. I also counted the number of commercials I heard on the radio. Remember, this is just a 6 kilometre ride in 11 minutes. How many total advertisements? 67. In 11 minutes. 67 advertisements.

*In the bar, in the senate, in the alley, in the study
Pimping dreams of riches for everybody
Something for nothing, new lamps for old
And the streets will be platinum, never mind gold
Well hey, pass it on.*

It’s hard not to desire. We want things. Maybe we want a person. Maybe we want the traits of a person or something they have. But why! Why do we desire things? Why do we want things that don’t belong to us and which rightly belong to someone else?

As you read Scripture you get the sense of what the dilemma is. It has to do with our brokenness: We know something is wrong and so we think we can fix it on our own. We think we can find some sort of special remedy to fill the whole within us—a sort of special remedy that *doesn’t* include total reliance upon God as a part of the equation. Do you want to know where most suicides are committed in Ontario? Casino washrooms. It’s false hope. Which is why Christianity has always been very suspicious of anything that promises to make things better for us without acknowledging God and the fact that he is a God who provides. The answer to false hope is the only Hope.

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As we consider these commands and what to do about them, I want to ask us 2 questions. The 1st is this: *Who gives us our freedom, our life?* Notice how the commands start. Like most books we read now-a-days there is a preface. The preface is this: “*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*” That’s what sets the tone for the whole thing. It is as if we are to hear that preface before each and every line with a therefore in front of it, kind of like this:

*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...
Therefore, honour your father and your mother.*

*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...
Therefore, you shall not commit adultery.*

*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...
Therefore, you shall not steal or covet.*

And so the command to not steal and to not desire, is a reminder to act like people who have *already been given* the greatest gift, freedom and a second chance at life—How can we lust for anything more when God has already given us everything we really need?

I think of a child who has been given the greatest gift of all time. Its Christmas morning and it's exactly what he wanted. He is ecstatic, over the moon! But then his sister, three feet over, opens a present, and after seeing her excitement, and with the wrapping paper more freshly torn than his own, he lunges toward it, wanting a piece of the newest toy in the room. He's so high on sugar that his sense of judgment is blurred. As he does so he drops his own present and it falls to the floor and smashes. Now his sister is crying and he looks at her present, now firmly in his hands. A forlorn look sculpts across his young face; he is disappointed. 'This present stinks,' he says, and quickly looks back to his own gift—now in pieces on the floor. How tragic is it when being a part of a people who has been given freedom of Egypt, and now forgiveness for sin, if we contented ourselves with dropping the best present we could every receive, forgetting in the process the One who gave it to us—and all for something so much less beautiful!



The second question is this: *Do we trust God to really provide for our needs, or not?* It really comes back to the 23rd Psalm. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Is he really our shepherd? Do we trust that he can actually provide for our needs? Are we content with what we've been given? Or, do we kind of want the Candy Man? There's a cancer in Christianity. It's called the prosperity Gospel. In short, the message is this: Do what God wants and he will make you prosperous in this life. Funny, I thought the Gospel was of God's love in the crucified Messiah, a life-giving sacrifice that offers grace and forgiveness, and freedom from sin. Hmm.

Canadian theologian Brian J. Walsh responds in this way with a sharp bite of sarcasm: "Western materialistic affluence coupled with two thirds world poverty is normal. A proliferation of cheap and useless consumer goods is normal. Environmental collapse is normal. Dedicating one's life to economic growth is normal. People living for the weekend is normal. A throwaway society is normal. Deficit financing is normal. Rapid and greedy resource depletion is normal." But Cockburn has a point. He goes on to say that "the trouble with normal is it always gets worse."⁴

To trust God to provide for us doesn't mean that we can't want things. It's okay to want a better life, or to be in a healthier relationship, or to want the best for your kids or parents. That's okay. God wants blessing for us. The issue is not good things for God's people; the issue is (1) the creeping sense of distrust that God isn't God; (2) that if God *does* happen to be God, well, then, maybe he just doesn't care; (3) the thought that since God doesn't care we had better look out for ourselves first; and (4) we go out and get what we think is ours at the expense of other people because we are alone in this mess.

In the final analysis, I think it has to do with clarity about who God is. Is our God the one who frees his people from slavery and from sin, or isn't he? We are often given this reminder from people who are in much worse shape than ourselves.

The obituary for Hugo Gryn, one of Great Britain's most respected rabbis, recalls the story of when he was a boy in the concentration camp at Auschwitz. "Hugo's father insisted they observe the Sabbath and the other festivals. Hugo remembered until the day he died a time when, to observe the Sabbath, his father took a piece of string and put it in a bit of butter and lit it to make a *shabat* candle. Hugo was furious and protested, "Father, that is all the butter we have!" His father said, "Without food we can live for weeks. But we cannot live for a minute without hope."⁵ God is still God.

"The truly happy person [and I don't meant the artificially happy person, but the truly happy person] is the one who wants, more than anything else, what he already has."⁶

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. And even if it doesn't always seem like he lies us down in green pastures, he *always* restores our souls. Why? Because in a world where silver crumbles and gold fades, God is always God.

Now to the One who was, and who is, and who is to come,
be all glory and honour now and forever.

Amen.

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¹ The album "The Trouble with Normal" was released in 1983 by True North Productions. The song was written by Bruce Cockburn.

² Brian J. Walsh, *Subversive Christianity: Imaging God in a Dangerous Time* (Seattle: Alta Vista), 39.

³ Adapted from: Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 82.

⁴ Walsh, *Subversive Christianity*, 17.

⁵ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 132.

⁶ Quoted from Roy Oswald in: Roy Oswald, *Finding A Balance for Effective Ministry* (Alban Institute, 1991), 186.