

Loving His Commandments

The Eighth Commandment-C

Exodus 20:15
Part Twenty-One

With Study Questions

Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
7/22/2018

Loving His Commandments

The Eighth Commandment-C

Part Twenty-One

Exodus 20:15

You shall not steal (Exodus 20:15).

The Master Thief

Unexpectedly coming upon some ancient ruins in Rome was a favorite moment for my wife and me in a recent visit. We shared a glass of wine as music began to play out of nowhere. It was magical. We sat and began to imagine what this place must have been like. There were columns, but they were holding nothing up. There were paths that led nowhere. Roofs were absent and many walls were just missing.

There was a beauty to it, but there was also something very wrong. It had become a place to view and perhaps learn, but not a place to live. I would not have wanted to spend the night there. Our little excursion would come to an end and we would retreat to the comfort of our hotel room and modern restaurants.

Ruins can happen for any number of reasons. Sometimes it's just a lack of maintenance. It could be natural disaster, war, depopulation because of a deficiency of natural resources. But ruins can also be a result of deliberate acts of destruction. Somebody, or some group, with the motives and resources can decide that they want no recollection of a particular culture to continue to exist. History can provide a long list of villains who pillage and plunder; to ruthlessly take whatever they can and destroy what they can't.

These types of ruins, the types that become ruins through deliberate acts of destruction, can appear just as beautiful as those ruins that came about through neglect or some less devious or devastating undertaking.

There is beauty in this world that we can and should enjoy. But there is also something wrong. And we all have a feel for it, more or less. It wasn't as if when my wife and I went back to our hotel room or restaurant, life was perfect. And if, even for a while, it seems perfect, that perfection will soon come to an end.

Something happened that resulted in the world-the creation-becoming a sort of ruins. We can see that there was once vitality-a beauty-that has been defiled. We have this idea of flawlessness, but it is nowhere to be found. Life is like a museum that someone drove a tractor through. The artifacts are still there and still beautiful, but not quite right. They're damaged. We want things to be the way they should. But that goal is elusive.

And what inevitable happens-what we inescapably do-in our efforts to make things feel right, is make things worse. Relationships are ruined careers are devastated, domestic, cultural and international conflict so easily boil over in our efforts to extract

what the ruins are incapable to yielding. Great evil is embarked upon through this desire to make things feel right, to reach that elusive goal. We depend upon the ruins of life to deliver something they simply can't deliver.

We think the right person, the right job, the right house, the right weight, the right friends, the right bank account will get us there. And when it doesn't, we blame them or blame ourselves. We might rage at others, we might pity ourselves or we may just settle-settle for the sad reality that this is as good as it gets and there is no point in looking any further.

Because this is the uniformed and inevitable reality of human history as well as our own personal history as individuals, we tend to accept this as natural-as the way things are supposed to be. But that would be a mistake. To get so used to the pain that we decide to ignore it can be fatal. Even the slightest recurring pain may be cancerous. We need to feel that pain and acknowledge its genesis. Its genesis involves a thief. A thief has entered human history. And we (and by 'we' I mean all of creation) have become ruins through a deliberate act of destruction.

There is a master thief, who has taken what is not his. He is a thief and a usurper. Jesus said of him and his minions:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy (John 10:10a).

His thievery and subsequent death came through, and continues to come through deception-stealing and lying always goes together. This devil is called "**the father of lies**" (**John 8:44**). And his initial lie, through which his thievery began, was to set his own word as superior to the word of God. "**Has God indeed said...(Genesis 3:1)?**" opened the door to his plunder.

What Has He Stolen? What Does That Look Like?

The next two questions go together. What has this master thief stolen and what does that look like or how is it recognized? The answer to the first question is both vast and simple. He has stolen everything. The Apostle John put it this way:

...and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one (1 John 5:19).

Literally, John is telling us, the entire cosmos reclines in the evil one. As one of the Puritan prayers indicate, "**The heavens are not clean in thy sight.**"¹ When the master thief offered Jesus "**all the kingdoms of the world and their glory**" (**Matthew 4:8**), Jesus didn't question his ownership. His contamination is universal. What has he stolen? Everything. But what does it look like? As we indicated earlier, there remains a beauty to the ruins of creation.

One can only imagine the initial horror when Eve ate and gave to her husband and he ate and their eyes were opened to the darkness they were complicit in creating (Genesis 3:6, 7). But it is not as if this thievery (what theologians call *the fall*) is clearly revealed as

¹ The Valley of Vision, p. 38.

ruinous to the natural eye. Even when the curse is pronounced we see there will still be the beauty and joy of children. There will still be the companionship of marriage. There will still be the tastiness of food. But there would also be pain, sweat and death. These curses are things we now take for granted.

The devastation of the fall is not be readily apparent to the natural eye. Though the enemy of our souls has stolen, and ruined the created order, he is quite good at establishing curb appeal upon the dilapidated structure. The engine sputters and the brakes are bad but the car will be purchased because of a shiny new paint job. As the Proverb indicates, it is no difficult task on the part of the interloper to capture us **“with her eyelashes” (Proverbs 6:25).**

The Apostle whom Jesus loved, put it this way:

For all that *is* in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not of the Father but is of the world.¹⁷ And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever (1 John 2:16, 17).

The glitter is seductive. It is no wonder that the psalmist beseeched God in prayer, asking:

Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways (Psalm 119:37).

There remains an external beauty to the created order. A warm breeze, a beautiful sunset, a delicious meal, talent in the music, art, sports math and other academics can be appreciated, admired and utilized. But they are not to be trusted. By not trusted, I do not mean not trusted within the boundaries of their limitations. If the fallen medical world comes upon a cure for a disease, it is not an act of faithless disobedience to take the pill.

But this world will never provide the ultimate answers or hope. We can look and look but will never find it. No matter how large the telescope or powerful the microscope. Ultimate answers will never be found through empiricism or rationalism. This is not to say we should not engage in science or in thoughtful introspection. Our senses and our thoughts are valuable and useful. But their mere use will never get us there. Why?

Because what escapes our attention is that we, ourselves, are part of the plunder. We are a portion of what was stolen. We too are in the sack of the thief. It was not without reason that Jesus would so often speak to His audience with the words, **“He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Matthew 13:9).** It’s as if the hearing (and by hearing we are talking about understanding and embracing) of His words require some special provision from outside of ourselves.

When it became apparent that Peter understood what Jesus was teaching, Jesus revealed the source of that understanding:

Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven (Matthew 16:17).

And it is precisely here (in the thinking process) that the romance of the ruins begins to feel more like the violation of a home invasion. Some of you have experienced a robbery in your home. There is an intrusion and defilement of a home that has been robbed. It's not just the stuff. Somebody has been in your room.

What has been stolen² is our innocence, a reliable sense of goodness, objective personal morality and cultural ethics, (however defined), our lives and horrifyingly our ability to even know what has happened. As a screenwriter once put it: **"The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world that he didn't exist."**

But this lack of ability does not silence us. While blinded and tossed to and fro from the sack of the thief, we continue to scream. Dylan wrote:

**In a soldier's stance, I aimed my hand
At the mongrel dogs who
teach Fearing not that I'd become my enemy
In the instant that I preach.**

One great thing we love to preach is that it is wrong to preach. In our rejection of that which is good, right and true, the Apostle Paul writes that we continue **"professing to be wise"** and in so doing become **"fools" (Romans 1:22)**.

What does this thievery look like? It looks like a world that has lost its way and has no genuine ability or desire to find it. They will believe anything but the truth. Or as G. K. Chesterton is credited to have said:

When a man stops believing in God he doesn't then believe in nothing, he believes anything.

How Is It Restored?

The news seems bad. It's getting even worse when we read that, according to the Apostle Paul, we are not merely captives of this thief, but children of the thief and thieves ourselves. We are called **"sons of disobedience"** and **"by nature children of wrath" (Ephesians 2: 1, 3)**.

So how does restoration take place? How are all things made new? Toward the end of Scripture we see the anticipation of a restored creation:

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." ⁵ Then He who sat on the throne said, **"Behold, I make all things new."** And He said to me, **"Write, for these words are true and faithful (Revelation 21:4, 5)**.

² I must emphasize that humanity were willing participants in this nasty enterprise. We are not merely victims but willing perpetrators. "Every sin, both original and actual, being a transgression of the righteous law of God, and contrary thereunto, doth, in its own nature, bring guilt upon the sinner, whereby he is bound over to the wrath of God, and curse of the law, and so made subject to death, with all miseries spiritual, temporal, and eternal" (WCF, 6:6).

So how does this happen? It is critical for us to realize that this restoration is not merely a matter of our cleaning up a vandalized house or seeking to rebuild a ruined structure. Though, as Christians, we are called to one in holiness and obedience, to seek to walk in holiness without addressing and somehow contending with the master thief is a fool's errand. Or to use the words of Jesus, it would be like building our house **"on the sand" (Matthew 7:26).**

The thief and his power and ownership must be defeated. And we are as powerless as the Israelites on the side of the mountain by the Valley of Elah. There is a Goliath in the valley who taunts us with the power of enslavement and death and we have no answer. But there is a champion. One anointed for such a task. One, who His own death destroys...

...him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage (Hebrews 2:14b, 15).

It's been said that "Jesus suffering death overcame; Satan wielding death succumbed." And as David cut off the head of Goliath with the giant's own sword (the sword where he had no doubt won so many victories) the enemy would be defeated by that which he himself inaugurated, that is death. Through the death Christ we find the death of death. Or as in Isaiah:

He will swallow up death forever, And the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces (Isaiah 25:8a).

Who is worthy to accomplish such a celestial and eternal task? It is the **"Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David" (Revelation 5:5).** But when we turn and look we see **"a Lamb...slain...(who) redeemed us to God by (His) blood" (Revelation 5:6, 9).** It is Christ alone who can take back that which was stolen?

We spoke of a the violation of a home intrusion. Jesus uses a similar metaphor in describing His restoration of all things.

Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house (Matthew 12:29).

Jesus would bind the strong man (the devil) and take back that which was rightfully His. This should not be understood as some purely retaliatory or militant act on the part of Jesus. It would be by a ransom paid (Matthew 20:28). The great victory, the great restoration and redemption of a usurped creation would be accomplished by way of Calvary.

As willing participants in the master thief's nefarious, he is defeated and we are redeemed through Christ. His false ownership and all the darkness associated with it is "nailed to the cross" (Colossians 2:14). Or as Paul put it, it is in the cross that Jesus,

...disarmed principalities and powers, (and) made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it (Colossians 2:15).

Now it is to the cross that we turn as we prepare for the Lord's Table.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How is creation similar to ruins? What examples can you think of (pages 2, 3)?
2. In what ways can our desires to make things right affect relationships and other behaviors in our lives (pages 2, 3)?
3. What did the master thief use in order to steal (page 3)?
4. What did the thief steal (page 3)?
5. Is the world entirely unattractive as a result of the fall? Explain (page 4)?
6. To what extent can human disciplines be trusted (page 4)?
7. What is required for the natural person to grasp his/her fallen condition and why is this so (pages 4, 5)?
8. What is necessary for restoration to happen (pages 5, 6)?

