



Central Peninsula Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

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Deuteronomy 5:21
Romans 7:7-8
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The One That Got Me

SERIES: *The Good Life: Finding Freedom in the Ten Commandments*

“What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COVET.’ But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead” (Romans 7:7-8).

We’ve been studying the Ten Commandments. Have you ever wondered how someone who grew up in a first century Jewish home and later studied the commandments under one of the greatest Jewish scholars might have thought about them? Well, today, we’re privileged to have with us just such a man. His name is Saul. I’m sorry, should we call you Saul or Paul?

PAUL’S CONVERSION STORY DOES NOT TELL THE WHOLE STORY.

Well, I was born as Saul, but I prefer the name Paul; the apostle Paul. Most of you think you know me pretty well. You’ve read a few of my letters. Some of you have heard my story from the time you were old enough to wiggle in your seat in Sunday School. You’ve cut me out with plastic scissors, colored me with your crayons, and stuck me on your flannelgraph. You think you know me...

You know the story of what happened to me on the road to Damascus. In Jerusalem I obtained official letters from the High Priest. They authorized me to carry out my mission with the full cooperation of the synagogues in Damascus. My purpose was to go there and weed out both men and women who belonged to this sect called The Way. What a name, huh? The Way! I thought, who do they think they are? For thousands of years the hope of my forefathers had stood the test of time, but now they come along and act like they’re the WAY to God. What foolishness! But people were listening; their movement was growing. So I would hunt them down and drag them back to

Jerusalem where they would be put on trial like their Master, Jesus. I already presided over the stoning of one of them named Stephen. The taste of his blood was sweet and I wanted more.

But you know what happened. On the road, as I was approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground, and heard a voice calling out to me, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” This light, I knew what it meant. This was the Shekinah glory; the light of God. But his question puzzled me. “Persecuting,” he said. “Why are you persecuting me?” I wasn’t persecuting God; I was serving God. Who was this? So I asked him, “Who are you?” What he said next changed my life forever. He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” The light was so bright I couldn’t see a thing, but there was another light beginning to shine in my heart. And for the first time I could see that this Jesus, the very One I’d been persecuting, was the Messiah of God. I came to understand that his death was not the death of a deluded criminal, but the death of the Son of God for my sin, and not just mine but the sins of the world.

But you know all of that. And you think that was the beginning for me. In many ways it was. But what you don’t know is that it was really just the final straw of a long struggle.

PAUL WAS A PHARISEE WHO WAS BLAMELESS IN KEEPING THE LAW.

Let me go back even further. You must understand where I had come from. I was born a long way from Jerusalem in a place called Tarsus. That’s in the southern part of what you call Turkey. I was circumcised on the eighth day. That means I was born into the Jewish faith. I wasn't circumcised as an adult convert; I was an insider from the start. Not only that, I was a descendent of the tribe of Benjamin, one of the most respected tribes in all Israel. Benjamin was special; he was the only one of Jacob's twelve children to be born in the Promised Land. Benjamin's

warriors were famous for their bravery. I was named after Israel's first king who came from the tribe of Benjamin. Jerusalem, the holy city, was in Benjamin's territory.

I was a Hebrew of Hebrews; born into the faith; descended from the tribe of Benjamin. But that's not all. I began to learn the law of God in my fifth year. When I was ten, I began studying to become a Pharisee, a group of select men with a long tradition of zealous adherence to the law. They said I was smart, determined, headed for great things. And when I was thirteen, I was sent to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel. That doesn't mean a lot to you but for us that was like getting into Harvard. Gamaliel was a student of Hillel and was the most influential Pharisee of our time. I sat at his feet and studied the law under the best scholar of our day. I knew everything it said; did everything it required. I adhered to a set of behaviors few could match. Even among the Pharisees, nobody was more committed than me. I was passionate about preserving our Jewish heritage. That's why I went after The Way; Christianity was a threat to our ancient faith, and I did everything I could to rid the world of those heretics.

PAUL STRUGGLED TO KEEP THE TENTH COMMANDMENT.

But there came a time when the things I learned collided with the man I knew I was. Oh, I was committed to the Ten Commandments. I ordered my life around them. I worshipped no other gods and tried to rid our nation of those who did. I would hardly speak the name of Yahweh for fear of using it in vain. I kept all thirty-nine Sabbath restrictions. I held my mother and father in honor. I did not murder or steal or lie.

But then I came to the tenth commandment. Funny thing about the tenth commandment. It's the last one on the list and so you don't think about it much. Maybe God just wanted a round number. You can't have just nine commandments. That's like having nine fingers. But of all the commandments I found this the hardest to observe. Do not make an idol, do not murder, do not steal; I could do all of that. I could keep those rules. I could make choices and manage by behavior so I didn't cross the line. But this one; how do you manage this one? It began to haunt me.

Coveting is not a behavior; it's a feeling; a wanting. To covet is to crave, to yearn for something, to hanker after something that belongs to someone else. We covet when we

set our hearts on anything that's not rightfully ours. Coveting is the sin of desire. You see something; you want it. How do you manage that?

I knew that not all desires are bad. God made us as creatures of desire. Our desire for food reminds us to eat. Our desire to do something useful motivates us to work. Our desire for friendship draws us into community. And the greatest of all desires is the desire to know God and to please God. Those are all good things.

I knew those desires, but what I also found within myself was desire of a different kind. It was like something good had been twisted. I was never satisfied; never content. I began to see that my desire did not include love of God or of men. If I truly loved God, I would be content and grateful for what he gave me. But I wanted more. It wasn't material things I desired. It was ambition. It was the drive to surpass others in everything I did. And I could never get enough; enough attention; enough acclaim; enough recognition. I didn't love God, nor did I love my fellow man. It was myself I loved the most. I knew this because whenever they got what I wanted, I didn't rejoice. Oh, I pretended to, but deep down I seethed; I envied. I didn't love God. I didn't love man. The tenth commandment was the one that got me.

And then it hit me. This commandment was tenth not because it was least but because it was the root of everything else. Why do people steal? Why do we murder? Why do we commit adultery? Because desire has been twisted and gotten out of control. This is where sin always starts. First, we want something. Then we start thinking about how much we want it. Soon it starts to dominate our thoughts, until finally it becomes an obsession. When we get to that point, sin will have its way with us. And before we know it, we've even broken the first commandment. That thing we covet has become for us a god. I was an idolator!

I began to realize that God wanted more than just my rule keeping; he wanted my heart. He wanted to penetrate beneath the surface of my life. He wanted inward righteousness as well as outward obedience. I should have known that. How many times had I spoken the words of our beloved Shema, "*Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart*" (Deut. 6:4-6). I should have known it all starts from within.

Some of you think you've kept the ten commandments, but you need to look again. Coveting is why you focus on what you don't have instead of being grateful for what you do have. Coveting is what causes that little twinge of disappointment whenever someone else gets what you want. It's how you react when a coworker get the promotion, when your roommate finds romance and you're left single, when your friend goes on a dream vacation and you're left sitting at home. If you can look in your heart and say you've kept the tenth commandment, you're a better man than me.

I'll bet you didn't know all of that about me. But, perhaps now you can understand. When I was on that road to Damascus, when that blinding light knocked me to the ground, I was already struggling. Deep down I knew I had not just broken the tenth commandment, but the first and the second and all the rest. All my righteousness was like filthy rags. So when I heard the voice of Jesus I began to understand the very reason he had come. He was the fulfillment of all those prophecies. The prophet Isaiah wrote of one who would be *"...despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief..."* He said that he would be *"...like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers..."* Why? Isaiah said, *"All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him"* (Isaiah 53). He died for me and I put my trust in him. He died for you as well, but to understand that you have to come to grips with how deep sin runs. That's where the tenth commandment comes in. If you can look in your heart and say you've kept the tenth commandment, you're a better man than me; better for sure than the ones Christ came to save.

PAUL FOUND TRUE CONTENTMENT IN CHRIST.

But that's not the end of my story. It wasn't the end of my struggle either. Don't get me wrong. My desires changed. I wanted more than anything to know Christ and to make him known. But, from time to time, I still felt that old desire surge up within me.

Not long after I began to follow Jesus I came back to Jerusalem. I wanted to become acquainted with the apostles: Peter, James and John. I wanted to tell them of my newfound faith. Deep down I felt like they should be glad I was on

their team. But at first they didn't believe me and that hurt. I felt that proud desire again.

Finally, I got to know Peter. He was a great man. A great preacher. And from time to time I found myself wanting what he had. He had walked with Jesus in the flesh. He had seen all those miracles. He had sat with him by the fire and ate fish cooked with his nail pierced hands. When he preached, people listened. Three thousand people came to Christ after hearing just one of Peter's sermons. I'd be lying if I told you I never wanted what Peter had.

But, little by little, I learned. And what I learned was very simple. I learned that I had Jesus and that Jesus was enough. I guess you might say I learned the secret of contentment. I learned that contentment starts from within. It starts with me knowing the God who loved me enough to send his Son for me. It starts with trusting that he will meet all my needs. When you know him and trust him you begin to want what he wants for you and not what YOU want for you. And being filled up and satisfied with him, you can rejoice in whatever he chooses to give to others as well.

I wrote about that to the Philippians. I told them *"I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity... I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me"* (Phil 4:11-13). You see, the secret is Him; it's him at work in my heart, filling me up and giving me the strength to trust him. I've learned that circumstances do not make me content; people do not make me content; recognition does not make me content; but he makes me content. I have Him and He is enough. I have in my possession *"the unsearchable riches of Christ"* (Eph. 3:8). With all of that, why would I covet anything (Acts 20:33). I didn't need to.

Well, next time you color me, or cut me out, or stick me on a flannelgraph, you might want to think about that. If you can look into your heart and say you've kept the tenth commandment, you're a better man than me; better for sure than those Christ came to save. But if you have trusted in him as your Savior, you have him, and he is enough.

