



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Rogation Sunday, Easter V, May 5th, 2013

**In the Name of the Father ✠ and of the Son
and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.**

If we are honest with ourselves – admittedly an extremely unpalatable exercise – we have to admit that acquisitiveness is one of the main driving forces in our society. Striving to obtain material possessions is the force that keeps the wheels of industry turning. The capitalist system, the system that has made this country so economically successful, is, in large part, inspired and motivated by unrestrained appeals to our sense of acquisitiveness.

This, for Christians at least, is decidedly uncomfortable thought: Acquisitiveness, it is claimed, equates with covetousness – the Second Deadly Sin – and we should, after all, be striving to obey God's commandments, not flagrantly flouting them. It is this sense of discomfort with America's acquisitiveness that often persuades serious Christians to embrace socialism. They believe that such collectivist economic systems are less materialistic and more altruistic than capitalism.

Actually, they are simply fooling themselves: While socialist societies are generally characterized by an almost total absence of the abundance one finds here in the United States, but this does not mean they condemn acquisitiveness. Far from it. They are philosophically materialist societies. The vast Soviet empire collapsed not because it rejected material abundance, but because the system had proved quite incapable of delivering it.

Should Christians, then, reject both capitalism and socialism and try to find a third way? The Commandments baldly declare: "Thou shalt not covet . . ." And surprisingly perhaps, the Bible, sheds much light what many imagine to be a problem of the industrial age.

It contains a number of case studies in covetousness. Take, for instance, the case of King Ahab, who ruled Israel from about 919 B.C. to 897 B.C. We learn from First Kings and Second Chronicles that he was a charismatic leader, able administrator and brilliant general. He should have been one of Israel's most respected kings. Instead, he is one of the most despised.

His fine qualities, however, were offset by terrible character flaws. He was utterly dominated by his wife Jezebel, who was as evil as she was beautiful. Both were fanatical followers of the Canaanite God Baal. But this does not account for the contempt in which Ahab is held. Ahab is despised for his besetting sin: covetousness. He controlled all Israel and yet he was never satisfied with what he had.

The 21st Chapter of the First Book of Kings tells us that he owned a palace in the city of Jezreel. There, his next door neighbor was a man named Naboth, who owned a vineyard that ran up to the palace wall – right at the place where Ahab had set his heart on expanding his kitchen garden.

Ahab begged his neighbor to sell. But Naboth explained that the land had been in his family for generations and that selling it would be a betrayal. Ahab asked Naboth to name his own price. Again, Naboth politely declined. Ahab continued to argue and wheedle – all to no avail.

At this point most ordinary people would have swallowed their disappointment and got on with plans that didn't involve Naboth. But not Ahab. He took to his bed in a fit of petulance and refused to eat. Jezebel solved the problem. She had Naboth sentenced to death on false charges of blasphemy and his goods were forfeit to Ahab,

A second case history involves King David. Like Ahab, David was a charismatic leader, able administrator and a brilliant general. But unlike Ahab, he was openhearted and generous with his worldly goods. And also by contrast with Ahab who was, as far as we can tell, slavishly devoted to Jezebel, David's undoing was his roving eye.

We learn in the 2nd Book of Samuel that David was taking the air on the roof of his palace in Jerusalem when he spied a stunning young woman taking a bath on the roof of a neighboring house. She was the wife of one of his most loyal comrades, Uriah the Hittite. Uriah was away campaigning with David's army – putting himself in harm's way to advance David's cause.

David didn't need women. Contrary to the Law of Moses, he was a polygamist. He also had scores of concubines. He could easily have done the decent thing. But he didn't. He invited Uriah's wife over for cocktails and hopped into bed with her. Bathsheba became pregnant and when it proved impossible to foist the child off on to Uriah as his own, David arranged to have Uriah killed in battle.

These two ugly examples show that intrinsically good people succumb to, exactly the same sort of temptations to

which intrinsically evil people habitually succumb.

However, it was not in the least bit sinful for Ahab to wish to make a vegetable garden out of Naboth's vineyard. Nor was it sinful for him to want it so badly that he offered a ridiculously high price for it. His sin was refusing to be satisfied with Naboth's refusal to sell – allowing his desire for the piece of real estate to poison his relationship with Naboth.

It was sinful, of course, for David to lust after his friend's wife. But his most serious sin of all was to convert his covertness into action. His shameful desire for Bathsheba led him to betray and murder one of his most loyal followers just to save face.

In short, acquisitiveness becomes covetousness when it impels us to break God's fundamental law – God's first and most important commandment to love God with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our minds and with all our strength and to prove it by loving our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.

Coveting things that belong to others prevents us from doing this. How can we love our neighbors as ourselves if we resent them for owning things that we, ourselves, would like to own? There's nothing wrong with wanting a bigger home and faster car. It is when we allow our desire for the things we haven't got to poison our relationships with other people that our acquisitiveness becomes sinful.

God doesn't tell us not to be acquisitive. He simply tells us not to lust after things that belong to other people – their spouses, their homes and their possessions. He doesn't tell us this to make us jump through hoops, but so that we might live harmony with our fellowmen. Covetousness is rightly called a deadly sin. Nothing can poison our lives and our relationships faster. *AMEN*