

***The Eighth Command –
“Owning Stuff”***

Matthew 6:19-24

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Raindrops on roses
And whiskers on kittens
Bright copper kettles
And warm woolen mittens
Brown paper packages tied up with strings
These are ***not my*** favourite things.

Don't get me wrong. I don't dislike these things. But “favourite” is a big word. So what are my favourite things? Well, there is the art on my walls—especially pieces by Alice VanderVennen and Matt Cupido.

My favourite things include books in general and the two I wrote, in particular. My favourite things include a glass of wine and a dish of ice cream. My favourite things include a house I'm still paying buckets for and a wallet my grandfather made for me when I was eight years old. These are a few of my favourite things.

We all have favourite things—big stuff, like cars and cottages, houses and horses; sentimental things that are not worth much in cash, but that remind us of what is really important in life—dishes from our parents, things our kids made for us before they grew up, or maybe even the first dollar we earned, sitting on our desk, framed.

We all have favourite things, and the truth is our favourite things are an important measure of ***who we really are***. For example, that wallet that is my favourite thing? The one my grandfather made? His name was Arend, and he was my mother's father. When I was six or seven, he visited Canada for the first time. My Dutch wasn't that good, and his English was non-existent. So we sat outside, under the maple tree, and he taught me to play chess. For hours and hours. My Dutch improved. I drank Freshie and he drank coffee. He was gentle and kind—I'm sure he let me win many games I shouldn't have. Later, I heard stories about him—about how he was part of the underground battle against the Nazis, about how he provided shoes for the disabled and poor, and about how, against his better judgement, he let my mother leave home and immigrate to Canada to marry my father.

It was a wonderful summer, and I came to love him. I wanted to be like him. But I only saw him once more, briefly, and all I have left of him and his inspiration is that wallet. It was one of the last things he made in his old shoe shop on Kerk Straat. Whenever I open the drawer in which I've put that wallet, I'm reminded of where I came from, who I am, and what is really important in life. Our favourite things should do that.

We all have favourite things that are the measure of who we really are. Owning such things is good. It is humane. Owning things, treasuring them, finding meaning in the things we own is a uniquely human thing, too. And when the Ten Commandments suggest we ought not steal, it is this great good thing, the privilege of owning things that help define who we really are, and what really matters—it is this great good thing that the command seeks to protect.

The Bible pays a lot of attention to owning and not owning, more than to any other moral theme. Right from the beginning of the Bible, from the story of creation, ownership of things—of the whole earth by humans—is celebrated. You will remember that Adam and Eve, according to this myth, were created by God and placed in the Garden of Eden. Stories like this are part of all ancient Near Eastern creation myths. However, in these myths, humans are usually put on earth, in a garden, in order to grow food for the gods and their debauched parties, because the gods are too lazy to do it for themselves. In these ancient myths, humans are created out of the dead bodies of gods defeated in the battle for heavenly power, and these humans are described as slaves who own nothing, whose lives mean so little to the gods that when the humans fill the earth and make too much noise at their own parties, the gods destroy them with a flood.

The Bible's creation myth, though, has a very different perspective on Adam and Eve. The Genesis story says that Adam and Eve were created out of the good earth, in the image of the living God, not to be slaves for the gods, but to enjoy life. Adam and Eve are given Eden to own, to meet their own needs. "See," says God, "I have *given* you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food." That is, the garden belongs to Adam and Eve to meet their own needs, rather than to provide party food for the gods. According to Genesis, the earth, and everything in it, was given to humans to have and to hold, to till and *to keep*.

And that is how it is that all through the Old Testament, and into the new, one of the primary concerns of nearly every writer is imagining a world where everyone has his or her fair share to cultivate, to enjoy, and to prosper. Israel is supposed to be a land of milk and honey for all. This led to some amazing laws. For example, according to Israel's laws, if your neighbour

was in need you were supposed to lend money without charging interest. Another law states that every fifty years a jubilee year shall be celebrated. In that year any land that you have accumulated from others shall be returned to them, so that no Israelite family would be forever landless. Finally, when the prophets criticized the people of Israel, it was often for the ways in which the poor—especially widows, orphans and refugees—were not properly cared for or did not get their fair share. So, in one of the most famous of these passages, the prophet Amos says to the rich ladies in his congregation: “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who [live near] Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, ‘Bring something to drink!’ . . . “The time is surely coming upon you when [the enemy] shall take you [into exile] with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks.”

In the New Testament it more of the same. Jesus taught us to pray for our daily bread, because having enough remains a central moral concern for Jesus. In the first Christian community, described in Acts, Christians sold all they owned and laid it at the feet of the church leaders, so that they could redistribute their wealth to the needy. It was a primitive form of what we would today call communism. The apostle John says, “But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother [or sister] in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?”

So the right and the need and even the glory of owning things to shape for our own pleasure and for our neighbours good is a positive value in the Bible. And the flip side of this basic value is stated in the eighth command: “Do not steal,” and in the words of our text, “Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth.” When it comes to how much we own, scripture always seeks the golden mean—give me neither poverty nor riches.

Look, we all have favourite things, and that is fine. There is nothing in scripture to suggest that owning things is wrong. I said earlier that owning things is unique to humans, and what we count as our favourite things is a measure of who we are. But there is another measure of who we really are too. You see, scripture suggests—no, it pleads—with us to put owning things in a bigger perspective, this one: “Search for justice, help the oppressed, be just to the orphan, plead for the widow.”

Because if owning things is a great good thing, then sharing from what we own with those who do not have enough is also a great good thing.

So this is a place where, in my sermons about wealth and generosity, giving and keeping, I always get stuck. Part of the problem, you see, is that I'm preaching in a very artificial environment. We live in the wealthy West. Most—if not all—most of us belong to the

wealthiest five percent of the world's population that owns at least 100,000 dollars in assets, and that all together—that is, our five percent—owns more than three-quarters of the world's wealth. If there has ever been a people in the entire history of the world that has more than enough things, we are that people. Historically, and given a worldwide perspective, we have an embarrassment of riches.

And yet, it is also true that many of us struggle financially. It is expensive to live in Toronto. We worry about retirement, which might last thirty or more years. We'd like to pay for our kids' university. We need a house to live in, and all of us want to enjoy a vacation and drive a decent car. And it all costs and costs. Many of us, for all that we have, struggle from month to month with our financial obligations. I do. So I get it.

And yet, the same scripture that blesses ownership pleads with us to do what we can to make the world a more just place, and to make a beginning in our lives to contribute to that justice. We can start by making sharing a joyful spiritual discipline that we prioritize. There are all sorts of creative ways to do so. Make giving your charitable donations, including those for the church, a family project. Sit around the table with your kids, and together decide how you will give while explaining why. Educate yourself about First Nations poverty and the structural reasons for it. If you run a business, or are an executive, find ways to hire people on the fringes of society, or find ways to invest in projects that build real wealth for people—for workers and clients, for the nation and all of its diverse peoples. When you speak with your member of parliament, or when you vote, remember that, as the Olympics reminded us, the world is a single community, so foreign aid shouldn't be an afterthought, and that addressing poverty in Canada should be a national priority. Add a child to your last will and testament, and call that child "Charity," giving a generous share of what you have accumulated to the poor or to some other socially good project—making sure to discuss this with your children as well. Make a point of decluttering, of living simply in most things even while you continue to enjoy your favourite things.

In sum, scripture suggests that owning things is a great good—for everyone. So enjoy your favourite things. And, when it comes to neighbours in need, near and far, cultivate an attitude of generosity and sharing so that to the best of your ability, they too can enjoy owning things.

It's the Christian thing to do. A sixteenth century catechism—that is, a document that sums up the teachings of the Christian faith—the Heidelberg Catechism, in this case, puts it this way. The meaning of the eighth command is, "that I do whatever I can for my neighbour's good,

that I treat others as I would like them to treat me and that I work faithfully so that I may share with those in need.”

Our doing so would certainly be one of my favourite things. And doing so will define who we really are.