

## **"Getting the Slavery Out of People"**

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Sunday, October 31, 2021

Based on Brian D. McLaren *"We Make the Road by Walking"* Chapter 10

Texts: Exodus 20: 1-17 and Matthew 22: 34-40

It's Halloween morning, and so it seems right to talk about something scary. You and I have done it before, but it's always fraught with danger. We want to do it. We plan for it. We get excited about it. We can't wait for the day to come. Well, until it does. That day we begin to.... don't say it...change. In this chapter, Brian McLaren defines for us something we talked about a couple of weeks ago, slavery in the modern age for people like us. "On a personal level, we know what it is to be enslaved to fear, alcohol, food, rage, worry, lust, shame, inferiority, or control." I would add, we also know what it means to be enslaved to our money, our cultural identity, our methods, and assumptions. McLaren continues, "On a social level, ...millions at the bottom of pyramid work like slaves from before dawn to after dark and still never get ahead. And even those at the top of pyramid don't feel free. They wake up each day driven by the need to acquire what others desire, and they fear the lash of their own inner slave drivers: greed,

debt, competition, expectation, and a desperate, addictive craving for more, more, more.”

People today are stressed out by family issues, community problems, the rampant division in our country, economic realities, and a host of other stressors that combine to make us among the most medicated generation in human history. If that isn't scary, I don't know what is. Meanwhile, we're losing those things that gave us foundations like family, church, and even basic social interaction. Covid-19 has not helped as we've become increasingly isolated, and our isolation feels like a prison to many, and it's caused us to act in ways we otherwise would never consider. And that's before we count the loss of so many to this horrible disease. We've changed not by choice, but by necessity. Some of that has been in good ways, in other settings, not as much. We've felt lost, alone, uncertain, and frightened. “We just want to get back to normal” is the one thing people on all sides of the political spectrum agree. As if normal was life-giving and free from slavery. Covid deserves a lot of the blame for the situation we're in, but much of what we're encountering was occurring before Covid arrived and all the disease has done is exacerbated pre-existing conditions.

So how do we get out of this scary mess that the world is in? Some would say, "Just get back to the Ten Commandments and all will be well!" Maybe that's why we put them in courtrooms because that's where people need to be told "thou shalt not covet." The problem is our entire economy, and the way live is primarily based on coveting. As Bryan Sirchio, a noted UCC musician once put it, "you want something someone else has so bad you'd take it if you could." Well, we'd never do that! Maybe not literally, but how many of us spend time wanting the car, the clothes, the shoes, the house, the spouse, the body, the money, the family, ... something that someone else has that from the outside looks perfect and we want it. Desire in and of itself isn't the problem. Desire itself is part of who we are, but when it becomes, we'd do anything to get it, then the problem occurs. How much of our lives will we sacrifice to go after money to get much more than what we need? We're slaves to our desire. We think we just must have more. Where does it end?

McLaren continues, "From top to bottom, the whole system survives by plundering the planet purchasing this generation's luxuries at the expense of future generations' necessities." Ouch. Further, "exiting from today's personal and social slavery won't be easy. It will require something like a wilderness journey into the unknown. We know who we have been: slaves. We know who

we're going to be: free men and women, experiencing aliveness as God intended. And right now, we're a little bit of both, in need of the identity transformation that comes as we walk the road to freedom."

We have a lot to learn from the stories of the Exodus. Stories of a people freed by God and who, for reasons of fear and personal security, demanded to return to slavery. The point: leaving slavery is hard work, no matter what kind of slavery you and I have experienced. The road to recovery, "zigzags and backtracks through a discomfort zone of lack, delay, distress, and strain." As any recovering addict will tell you, it isn't any easy road to travel. It's not a direct path. It requires decision-making, forward progress, and some backsliding. But I think they would agree with McLaren that this freedom road is where, "character is formed – the personal and social character needed for people to enjoy freedom and aliveness." McLaren also makes another statement that hit me directly in the heart, "Like those who have walked before us, we need to know that grumbling and complaining can be more dangerous than poisonous snakes or the hot desert sun." And yet, complaining is about all people do in today's world. It is one thing to look for solutions in the flaws we see before us, and quite another to sit back and watch the world self-destruct while complain about those working for change, no matter what they do. We are a fickle people, adoring someone one

day and vilifying them the other, based on nothing more than we disagree with them on a position they took.

It's hard work to change, no doubt. But continuing the way we are or even going back to the way we were can be disastrous. Doing either one fails to recognize that there is a better future ahead, but we must travel the way of the Exodus to get there. It's a long, winding, scary, hot, sandy, treacherous road, but it is not a road we travel alone. As people of faith, we know that God has been active in our lives, and we can trust that God will not leave us alone in this difficult journey. God left us minimal commands that are summed up by Jesus as "love God and love your neighbor." That is harder than it reads. God isn't always doing what we want or making change in the world the way we want to see it. We don't always understand what God is up to. And loving your neighbor? Now that is tough work, since often our neighbors are the greatest source of frustration in our lives.

McLaren wrote the Ten Commandments in easy to understand language. We can easily share all ten as they are in his book. Let me know if you want to see them and don't have a copy. But the last one, to me, is the most important. You know it as "thou shalt not covet." McLaren writes it this way, "In fact, if you really

want to avoid the violence of the old slave economy, deal with its root source – in the drama of desire. Don't let the competitive desire to acquire tempt you off the road of freedom.”

McLaren concludes the chapter and I this sermon the same way:

There are no shortcuts. The road cannot be made by wishing, by whining, or by talking. It can be made only by walking, day after day, step by step, struggle by struggle. It's easier, it turns out, to get people out of slavery than it is to get slavery out of people. So, people, let us walk the road – right through the middle of the desert.

Amen and amen.