

Souls for Sale

By David Feddes

You shall not covet ... anything that belongs to your neighbor. (Exodus 20:17)

"Gangsta rap" is a hot item. Rap albums are often crammed with filthy language and gutter talk. They glorify casual sex, brutal rape, racial hatred, using drugs, shooting your enemies, and killing cops. And it sells. Quite a number of gangsta rappers have gone platinum, with over a million albums sold.

There's a lot we could say about all this. We could talk about the rappers who've been arrested for drugs, rape, and murder; we could analyze the degrading content of their albums; but instead of going into all the gory and disgusting details, let's look at it from another angle. Let's ask why these albums are being produced in the first place.

Sometimes gansta rappers are called artists. They supposedly express the anger of deprived folks in the inner city. But you know who buys most of their albums? Rich white kids in suburban malls. Do you think they buy rap so they'll be more sensitive to inner city rage and despair? Dream on! They buy it to inject something shocking and dangerous into lives that are really rather tame and boring. So again, what's the real reason rappers produce this garbage, and why do agents and record companies spread it around? Money. It's that simple. Money.

Lately there's been an outcry, because rappers who've sold millions of albums get only a small percentage of the profits. They're so eager for success that, when they're first getting started and someone dangles the keys to a new BMW and waves a few thousand dollars of instant cash in front of them, they sign long-term contracts without looking at where most of the profits will go in the long run. They sign their lives over to shrewd agents and ruthless record companies, who then rake in untold millions. In other words, the rappers are greedy, but the agents and companies are just as greedy, and they come out with the biggest share of the money. They've been playing the game a lot longer, and they're a lot better at it.

Let's shift gears now, and go from the world of gansta rap to the world of a high tech business corporation. It's headed by a man who, according to all reports, drives himself relentlessly. When he got married recently, he cut back his workday—from 2 or 3 in the morning to midnight.

And he expects his employees to have the same driven attitude. As one of the company's main men says, "This company isn't a job; it's a way of life." The chairman prefers to hire people straight out of college. Young people are quicker to come up with new ideas, and they're also quicker to adapt themselves to company expectations and put all their time and energy into the company. If you hire people when they already have families, they might think that there's more to life than company success and personal income. And this approach seems to work. The company dominates its particular field, and many employees have become millionaires themselves.

Meanwhile, the chairman keeps looking for ways to beat the competition, and he keeps looking for new areas his company can get into and become the major player. A news magazine recently reported on a typical meeting. Someone brought up an idea that sounded like a real money-maker, and the chairman could hardly contain his excitement. "It's a gold mine," he exclaimed, and then, with profanity he added, "Get me

into that and [blankety blank] we'll make so much money!" The man is already worth billions of dollars, but he still gets excited every time he sees a chance to make even more.

By now you might wonder where I'm headed with all this. What does a gansta rapper have in common with a billionaire businessman? Well, despite some obvious differences, they have at least one thing in common: Both are symptoms of a system where greed is considered a virtue and where everything has a price tag, even the bodies and souls of men.

When it comes to gangsta rap, the important thing isn't overcoming the evil and horror of inner city life but marketing it. Sadness and sleaze are saleable. It's beside the point if an album corrupts impressionable kids; the only thing that matters is if they'll buy it. Profit is uppermost, and the impact on people is pretty much beside the point.

When it comes to running a business, the important thing isn't that people in your company have happy families and meaningful personal lives, but that they are high-energy, high-speed parts in a fast-moving corporate machine. The ideal is to keep the employees thinking and working, keep the customers buying and spending, and keep the competition from getting to the jackpot before you do. Profit is uppermost, and the impact on people is pretty much beside the point.

The Coveting Virus

We're looking at the last of the Ten Commandments. God says in the Tenth Commandment, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife ... or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Exodus 20:17). When you're infected by the coveting virus, you focus less on God than on stuff. You spend less time thanking him for what you have than longing for what you don't have. You care about your standard of living, not living by God's standards. You relate to other people less in terms of who they are as persons than in terms of whether they have something you want. You put price tags on everything, including other people.

Why does a gansta rapper spew all sorts of filth into a microphone? Because he covets the fame and fancy cars that others have. Why does the agent rip off the rapper and market the filth to impressionable kids? Because he covets a fatter bank account. Why does a billionaire keep working frantically? Why does he get his thrills beating the competition to where the money is? Because he covets being the best and having the most. Meanwhile, the rest of us would do almost anything if only we could make it to the top. If only we could have the fame and excitement of star entertainers. If only we could have the wealth and power of the giants of business. If only... If only... Is there anything that arouses our energies and shapes our priorities more than coveting?

Just look at the world of advertising. Many commercials have one simple aim: to arouse desire and make people covet. Why else do commercials feature shapely women in skimpy bikinis or bare-chested men rippling with muscles? They're selling beer or cars or something else that has nothing to do with bare bodies, but they show lots of skin anyway. Why? Because advertisers know that if you can somehow associate sexual lust with desire for a certain product, sales are going to go up. It's simple. Once you get the consumer to covet his neighbor's wife, he's more likely to covet his house, his car, his drink, and whatever else you'd like to sell.

Another advertising strategy is to feature a famous athlete or entertainer. People will covet what the celebrity has—they'll wish they were that rich and famous; they'll wish they were as successful and happy as that person appears to be in the commercial—and, almost without noticing, they'll also start to covet the product the celebrity is plugging. How much advertising is aimed simply at providing accurate information so the buyer can make an informed choice? Not much. More often, it's just a matter of getting people to covet. And let's face it: coveting can be very good for economic growth. Coveting is great fuel for the economic machine. When having more stuff is at the top of everyone's agenda, you get a society where everyone is working and producing and advertising and buying and selling at a frantic pace. And the result? Almost everybody does end up having more stuff. Okay, so maybe marriage and family and friendship and love and kindness are collapsing under all the immoral entertainment and the obsession with career that spring out of coveting, but hey, that's the price of prosperity. The economy is growing, money is changing hands, we have more stuff than previous generations, and that's what it's all about, isn't it?

Bodies and Souls for Sale

The last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, talks about the downfall of a society and economic system which it labels "Babylon." Revelation portrays this "Babylon" as a prostitute, because she will do anything for money. Everything is for sale. Everybody has a price. If you asked Babylon what matters most, she'd answer, "It's the economy, stupid." And it seems to work. Babylon is rich. Her economy is so vibrant that everyone else's prosperity is affected by it. However, Babylon the prostitute finally perishes under God's judgment. Revelation says:

The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes any more—cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and bodies and souls of men (Revelation 18:11-13).

There's almost nothing you can't buy in Babylon. Consumers have almost unlimited choices. Merchants do very well. The economy thrives. It sounds almost like heaven on earth. Except that the covetous values of Babylon destroy your relationship to others and bring you under the judgment of God.

Babylon sells everything, even the bodies and souls of men. In some societies, this happens through slavery or prostitution. But as I've been pointing out, our society has other ways of buying and selling bodies and souls. Pornographers, filmmakers, singers, and advertisers know that naked body parts are very saleable. They also know that violence, viciousness, blood, and mutilated body parts are saleable. There's money to be made, so there's a sale on bodies. Customers will pay good money and even sell their souls to get this trash.

And then there's the matter of running a business. What happens when companies run their business based on coveting? How do they relate to others? When they think of the Golden Rule, it's not "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." In relation to workers, it's "Do with others whatever makes the most profit for you."

In relation to competitors, it's "Do unto others before they do it unto you." And in relation to government, the Golden Rule is simply, "The one who has the gold makes the rules." They finance the campaigns of politicians who will help their bottom line; they hire high-powered lobbyists to shape laws in their favor; they seek the best government money can buy. Sound familiar?

Now, I don't want to leave the impression that the tenth commandment is opposed to all business and enterprise. It's great when a business tries to make a useful product or provide an important service; it's important to encourage creativity and efficiency; it's fine to work hard and expect your employees to do the same, and it's okay to advertise if you're doing it in a way that informs without manipulating. But all too often, we do business Babylon-style. Coveting takes over, and the uppermost thing becomes growth and profit, no matter what. Bodies are bought, souls are sold, and relationships are ruined.

Using People

When we covet, we're more interested in what our neighbor has than in who our neighbor is. We feel more love for his stuff than for him. Instead of loving people and using things, we tend to love things and use people.

When you covet your neighbor's wife, the wife is no longer a person. She's just an attractive body that could give you great pleasure. Her husband isn't a person, either. He's just a problem that stands between you and what you want. That's what happened with King David. The Bible says that David was out on the rooftop of his palace, looking over the city, when he saw a beautiful woman bathing. David lusted for her; he coveted his neighbor's wife, and he got the woman, Bathsheba, to go to bed with him. Then, when he feared her husband, Uriah, might find out, David told Uriah some lies and tried to cover his tracks. When that didn't work out, David arranged to have Uriah killed in a military campaign. Uriah had been one of David's most faithful soldiers, but once David coveted Bathsheba, Uriah's life and his loyalty meant nothing to David. Coveting led David into adultery, lying, and murder.

In another grim story, the Bible tells how King Ahab coveted a vineyard that belonged to his neighbor, Naboth. As soon as Ahab began to covet, Naboth was no longer a man to be respected, but a problem to be solved, and Ahab's wife Jezebel solved it. She got rid of Naboth. She arranged for phony witnesses to lie about him, and then she had him executed. Ahab's coveting made Naboth a thing. Coveting led to lying, murder, and stealing. Once you break the tenth commandment and start coveting, it gets easier to break all the other commandments. You treat your neighbor as a thing. You don't love him or her as a person.

And once you start coveting, it seems that enough is never enough. Ahab had all sorts of land, but he thought he couldn't be happy until he had Naboth's little plot as well. David had all sorts of women, but he thought he couldn't be happy until he had Uriah's wife as well. When you covet, you feel like you'd be happy if you could just get that one more thing that you want. But if you get it, are you satisfied? Not at all. You're already coveting something else. Whether it's sex or property or market share or money, no matter how much you get, you've always got to have more. The Bible says, "Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never

satisfied with his income" (Ecclesiastes 5:10). You can be worth billions of dollars and still be obsessed with getting more.

Coveting is like a black hole. When a star collapses in upon itself, it becomes extremely dense, and its gravity becomes more powerful than ever. As it pulls more matter into itself, it becomes even denser; its gravitational pull becomes even more powerful, and on it goes. The black hole sucks up matter almost endlessly, swallowing up everything around it, even light itself. That's what happens when you covet. You collapse in upon yourself and base your happiness on having what you want. From that point on, the more you get, the more powerful your coveting becomes, until you're nothing but a deep and utter darkness that swallows up whatever gets too close to you.

Unless the power of coveting is broken, your final end is the utter darkness and nothingness which the Bible calls hell. Already on earth, we get just a taste of hell in a competitive, ruthless, survival-of-the-fittest society where we're so busy using each other that we can't love each other, where we're so greedy and discontented that we can't enjoy God's love or love him in return.

Selling Your Own Soul

Once you put price tags on the souls of others, you also (maybe without even realizing it) put a price tag on your own soul. You sell out to the prince of darkness, the devil himself, with his insatiable appetite and his constant urge to devour. Coveting is the attitude of hell. When you do business with the devil, you may get more of what you want, but you lose your soul, both now and in eternity. And as Jesus said, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done (Matthew 16:26).

When we stand before the judgment seat of Christ, we'll discover what all the things we've coveted, all the stuff we've accumulated, is really worth. The Bible says, "Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death" (Proverbs 11:4). Righteousness is what counts in God's eyes, and nothing else. If we aren't somehow righteous in God's eyes, we are doomed forever. Eternal life isn't a commodity that can be bought with money. God doesn't take bribes. The Bible says in Psalm 49:7-9, "No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him—the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough—that he should live on forever and not see decay."

There's just one ransom, one price for redeeming a life, one payment that can save us on the day of judgment: "Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men" (1 Timothy 2:6). The Bible says that "it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed ... but with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:18-19). If you want to focus all your desire on something, if you want all your happiness to depend on it, if you want to base your destiny on something that won't let you down, then forget about all the stuff you've been coveting, and focus all your desire on the Lord Jesus. Depend on him as your source of happiness. Trust him to be your life both now and for eternity. Believe that he died to pay the penalty for all your sins and selfish desires. Believe that he rose again to bring you into a whole new way of thinking and living. Jesus is the only one who can give a fresh start to self-centered,

covetous people. So stop selling your soul to Satan, and trust that Jesus has purchased your soul for God. Repent of your sins. Receive the salvation Jesus bought for you with his blood.

If you do that, your life will change radically. Once you belong to Jesus, your highest priority isn't material but spiritual. Jesus tells us not to worry about food and drink and clothes, "for the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:32-33). In Christ your obsession with things has to end. As a Christian, your main preoccupation is to live as a citizen of God's kingdom and to find your satisfaction in doing his will.

And what is God's will? We've been focusing on God's will in the Ten Commandments. According to Jesus, all the commandments boil down to this: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37-38). In Romans 13:8-10, the apostle Paul echoes Jesus when he says,

The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

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