

The Tenth Commandment: No Coveting

Exodus 20:17

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus 20:17. Today, we come to the tenth of the C. And, looking at the big picture from what we have seen already, we can tell that there is an upward, an outward - and we'll see today - an inward focus of these commandments. It's obvious when you look at the first four commands, as they especially have to do with our duty towards God, that the thrust, the focus, of those commandments is 'Godward'; it's upward. We are obedient, especially in view of our relationship with the heavenly father, but that is also true of the so-called second table commands, - from the fifth to the tenth commands - as we are called to love our neighbor. The focus of those commands, too, is upward. They are 'Godward' in their focus. An illustration would be the fifth commandment - "honor your father and your mother". We are to honor father and mother because they are human representations of God's fatherly rule and authority. And so, our showing respect to father and mother is a reflection of our respect for the Heavenly Father. So, even that 'neighbor love' command, which has to do with human relations, has an upward focus to it. It has a 'Godward' focus.

But the commands also have an outward focus. There is concern for our actions to be truly loving. If the commands are summed up - in the commands to love God and to love neighbor - each of the second table commands tangibly asks us to love our neighbor in practical ways. We are to, of course, refrain from immoral taking of our neighbor's life. What greater violation could there be of the law of neighbor love than to wrongly take a neighbor's life? But, we are also to show covenant loyalty to God by refraining from immoral sexual activity with our neighbor, and thus doing harm to a neighbor, and so on through each of the second table commands. So there is an outward focus to these commandments. God is concerned not simply that we give a confession of faith that we love him and to trust in him, but that tangibly, in our day to day living, we love like people who claim to love God. You remember John warns us against claiming to love God, and yet hating our brothers. Well, the Ten Commandments make it clear that if you truly love God, you will tangibly and practically love your neighbor.

Now, there is a second aspect of that outward focus that I want to draw your

attention to for a few moments. We often think of the Ten Commandments in terms of personal morality, and this is very appropriate. But the commandments are even broader than that in our outward relations because they are concerns that preserve the welfare of the whole community. Breaking the fifth, the sixth, the seventh, the eighth, the ninth, and the tenth commandments, God says, hurts the whole community. There is no such thing as a 'private sin' that has no affect, whatsoever, on the whole community. And especially in these areas, God wants the believer to be thinking not only of his personal morality, his personal virtues, and standards of living, his specific individual relationships, whether within the family or with his friends, but wants us to think in terms of the whole community. One Christian individual's behavior impacts the whole Christian community. And so in that way the commands are outward. There is an upward and an outward focus to the commands.

Today, we are going to see that there is an inward focus to these commands, as well. God is concerned with the heart. Not merely our outward relations, not merely the welfare of the whole covenant community, but inwardly, He is concerned with matters of the heart. That is one of the lessons that we learn, par excellence, from the tenth commandment. So, let's look at God's holy and inspired word, and hear exodus 20, verse 17:

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox or his donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

Amen. This is God's word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray:

Our Lord, we would ask that You would show us ourselves in the light of the reflection of Your royal law, and that as You show us ourselves, You would uncover, You would discover, sin to us. In Your word you have shown us who You are and what You are like, and You are holy. In Your law, You show us Your holiness. So, having shown us Your holiness, show us our unholiness; and then, in Your mercy, lead us to Christ and to the Spirit for grace. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

This command, "do not covet", shows us that obedience to all the other commands begins in the heart. This command shows us that true obedience is not complete without 'heart obedience'. This command shows us that the Ten Commandments are not only about loving God, they are not only about loving neighbor outwardly, tangibly, and practically - they are also about how our hearts are before God. They have an inward focus about them. None of the commands can be merely kept outwardly, but must be kept from the heart. They are even broken from the heart. I've had several folks along the way as we've worked through this passage, say, "I'm really looking forward to next week's sermon, because that command is one that I don't have as much of a problem with" and I meet them on the flip side and they say, "Well, I learned a few things today that I

hadn't thought of and I really do need to work on that commandment." And that's the way it is, friends. We study these commands and we see how they are placed in Scripture, and we realize that we are all guilty of violation of these commandments.

About 20 years ago, Jerry Falwell invited Jay Adams to preach at Thomas Road Baptist Church, in Lynchburg, Virginia, and Jay Adams preached a wonderful sermon on "worry", based upon the Pauline passage from Philippians. And he started the sermon by saying, "Now everybody here today who is a murderer, please raise your hands." Nobody raised their hand. Then He said, "Well, okay, how many of you are liars?" One guy on the back row lifted his hand. And he said, "Well, at least there's one honest man in the house!" And then he said, "How many of you worry?" Every hand in the place went up. And he said, "We know that we're not supposed to murder, and we know that we're not supposed to lie, but do you realize that Paul says here, 'Do not worry'"

Now, what he was pointing to was the fact that the Bible is not simply concerned about our external actions. It's concerned about our internal state, because God is concerned about our internal state, and that is precisely what this commandment teaches. You and I have never seen somebody covet. We've almost seen them. We've seen the green glint in someone's eye as they coveted, but we can't see them covet. You covet in your hearts. You can see the effects of coveting. You can see the consequences of coveting. You can see the evidences of coveting, often times in horrible things that we do in the wake of coveting, but you can't see coveting because coveting happens in the heart. And this commandment teaches that God is concerned not simply with our outward actions, but also with our state of heart.

Now, I'd like for you to see two things today, first, in the Old Testament command and its application right here in verse 17. Then, I want to turn forward to Romans 7:7, and see how Paul applies this passage. Let's begin here, though, by noting five things about this command.

I. The Old Testament command.

Notice, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant or his ox or His donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." This command is telling us that God not only cares about the outward actions of His people, but He cares about the heart. He looks at the heart. Notice these five things about this commandment. First, notice that "you shall not covet" is repeated. Just in case you missed that, "You shall not covet." Sometimes we can get caught red-handed doing something and still try and find excuses or denials for what we've done. How much more is that the case when what we're being confronted with is a state of the heart? You know, a child may have his hand in the cookie jar right

when mom comes in the room. "What are you doing?" "Nothing!" Now, she saw him. The cookies are in his hands. The crumbs are on his mouth and shirt and pants. "Nothing!" We do that as adults; not the cookie jar, but something else; but, especially when it's a matter of the heart. A friend comes to us: "Brother, are you struggling with envy?" "Me?" "Naw." Because you know you can deflect the question, because nobody can make the proof. So God says, "You shall not covet" twice, because He knows that we are going to be looking for plausible denial when it comes to this sin. "Oh, no, I don't have a problem with coveting." "You shall not covet."

A second thing about this command - notice there are seven things we are told not to covet. You're not to covet your neighbor's house. You're not to covet your neighbor's wife, his male servant, his female servant, his ox, his donkey, and then, - conclusive - anything that belongs to your neighbor. Seven. A nice round Hebrew number indicating the totality of that which belongs to your neighbor, whether it is person or possession; the totality of your neighbor. You are not to covet.

Thirdly, notice that there are four categories that we are told not to covet. We are not to covet our neighbor's spouse. We're not to covet our neighbor's servants. We are not to covet our neighbor's animals, and then we are not to covet our neighbor's anything - spouse, servants, animals, anything. Again, a total ban on coveting that, which belongs to our neighbor.

Fourthly, notice that neighbor is mentioned three times in this command. That is vital, because that helps us to understand what is being forbidden here. The word "covet" in "you shall not covet" is a word that can be used for good things depending on the context, because the word simply indicates "desire". Now, if God is saying "you shall not desire," we are in even more trouble than we already were when we come to this commandment. But the command is not a generic or abstract command that you must not desire. Notice that it is set in the context of not desiring that which God has given to your neighbor, but not given to you. Over and over it is repeated - "your neighbor's", "your neighbor's", "your neighbor's". Desire is not being forbidden in the abstract, but what is being forbidden is coveting; that is, desire in the context of failing to consider our neighbor's best interest - putting ourselves ahead of our neighbors, wanting that which belongs to our neighbors, being jealous about that which our neighbor has, which we do not have; seeking wrong ways to get that which belongs to our neighbor. And so, the very mention of your neighbor three times helps you to understand what's being forbidden. All desire is not being forbidden, but all desire for that which is your neighbor's property, and which you desire to have for your own, is wrong.

Fifth, notice here that "house" means "household." When the Lord says, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house," He doesn't mean you can't covet that gigantic house in that really nice neighborhood here in Jackson. Now, of course, that command includes that kind of thing, but it's broader than that. When He

says you shall not covet your neighbor's house, He means you shall not covet your neighbor's household. Not just the physical structure that He lives in or the address that He lives at, but He means everything that is His. It is a comprehensive command. To covet is to have an inappropriate desire for something that belongs to someone else; or, to have an ungodly desire for anything that would take God's place or primacy or priority.

To covet, you see, is idolatry. I'm not making it up. Paul says that. In Colossians 3:5, he says, "Therefore, consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion." He goes on to add, "Evil desire, and greed, covetousness." And then he says this - "which is idolatry." Now, that's strange. Covetousness is idolatry.

How does the tenth command relate to the first command? This way: to covet is to deny God's providence. If God provides what we need, and we long to have something that He has not given to us in an inordinate way, then we are denying the goodness of His provision for us. And so, that thing that we desire may outstrip our loyalty to Him, and so covetousness becomes idolatry. Coveting - our *Catechism* reminds us - is discontentment with our own estate, envying or grieving at the good of our neighbor, and all inordinate emotions and affections to anything that is his. And since coveting cannot be regulated externally, this tenth commandment shows us the nature of the ten commands. They are not some sort of external only civil code. They are household instructions. How many of you have ever read a law code, a civil law code, with the tenth commandment in it? Right. None of you have, because there's not one in it. You can't enforce this command. You can enforce the consequences of it through sanctions. You can enforce thievery. You can enforce various other manners of the outward violation of another commandment related to coveting, but you can't enforce coveting. It is a matter of the heart, and that very fact shows us that these are not merely commands or a civil code, but household instructions. These are the principles, the moral values and tenants, of God's family, and this commandment, as we said, shows us the comprehensive and inward nature of God's commands. God, Himself, searches the heart. God looks at the heart. God is concerned about the state of the heart. He's not just concerned that we covet, and then steal. He made a command about stealing. He's not just concerned that we covet, and then commit adultery. He made a command about adultery. He's concerned about our coveting at all, and so He makes it a separate command.

How are you struggling with coveting? Are you longing for a relationship with someone else's spouse? Do you desire to have the respect and the reputation that belongs to another person? Do you want the material resources that another person has? You've just got to have what he has. You've just got to have what she has. Have you been so determined to acquire certain things that, along with acquiring those things, you have accrued inappropriate debt? Just because you "just had to have" those things? Do you have an excessive longing to be in a different situation or circumstance than you find yourself in now, at present? If so,

you are struggling with coveting. And this command tells us that God not only cares about our outward actions, but He cares about the heart, and He cares about this matter of coveting.

II. Coveting in the New Testament.

Second thing I'd like you to see is in Romans 7:7. Turn with me there. Look at the second part of verse 7. This commandment not only teaches us the inwardness of the law; that is, this commandment teaches us that God is concerned about the state of the heart, this command also shows us the inwardness of sin. You know, a lot of people think that as long as I am moral, as long as I don't do something that is a violation of the civil statutes, as long as I don't do something that is a violation of the community, and the context of the church, then I am an upright person. I am a blameless person. Paul thought about himself in those terms. He described himself as a Pharisee who was blameless with regard to the law. But He also tells us in Romans 7:7 that it was this commandment that taught him that he was a sinner. It was this commandment that taught him that his keeping of this commandment was rubbish. It was this commandment that taught him that he needed grace. It was this commandment that taught him that the law couldn't save him, because the law condemned him through this commandment. Look what it says in Romans 7:7: "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.'" Paul, in this passage, is defending the integrity of the law. He is saying, "Look, I'm not making disparaging remarks about the law of God. In fact, it was the law of God that taught me that I was a sinner." And so he tells us how the law taught him the sinfulness of sin, and the way it taught him the sinfulness of sin, it talked about something in his heart. Paul, like so many of the religious people of the day, thought in external terms in regard to righteousness. But he says that when he came to this command, that this command showed him the inwardness of his sin.

And my friends, this is very graphic. You will remember - we could do this if we turned to Acts 7 together - but you will remember that it was Paul's synagogue, and people from it, before whom Stephen preached his great sermon, and we are told that no one in Paul's synagogue was able to respond to the glory of Stephen's gospel preaching. And Paul must have been a frustrated man before that, coveting an ability to respond to Stephen's arguments, which were irrefutable because they came from God. We could show other illustrations of how Paul might have struggled with this sin, but it was this commandment that brought him to his knees. It showed him his sin. It showed him that he was lusting after something that was wrong.

What are the signs that you are coveting? Are your thoughts preoccupied with the world? Are you caught up with spiritual concerns, thinking about the lord, and his work and will and ways? Or is your mind, are your thoughts preoccupied just

with the things of this life, as opposed to the life of the age to come? Do you put more effort into obtaining the blessings of this life than you do in growing in grace, and laying hold of heaven? Is all your conversation about worldly things, or are you able to have natural, deep, meaningful, regular conversation about the things of the Lord with your family and friends? Are you willing to part with heavenly blessings in order to get earthly ones? Are you overloaded with worldly business? And, have you come to so love certain earthly pleasures that you would be willing to do anything to get them?

My friends, covetousness is a dangerous sin. There is no sin in all the Ten Commandments more dangerous than covetousness, because it is hard to discern. You are usually the last person to know that you are coveting. It is dangerous because it affects the whole soul. It allows your whole soul to be focused on worshiping something that is not God. It is dangerous because it is a radical sin, it is a root sin, it is a sin that leads to other sins. It is dangerous, especially for the believer, because it is soul killing. It allows a believer to profess faith in the lord Jesus Christ, to say that he loves God above all else while, while in reality pursuing something other than God, or doing it at the same time; and doing it even outwardly, respectably. It is a dangerous sin.

How should you respond to this sin, today? If you don't know Jesus Christ, maybe you've been thinking about it, and you realize you are struggling with covetousness, but you don't have a living, saving, vital relationship with Jesus Christ. Well, my friend, the answer is, you can. There is no response to this sin apart from Christ. You don't have the resources, apart from Christ, to battle this sin. The first thing that you ought to do, if you don't know Christ, and you do know this sin in your own life, is to run to Him. Because, only He can free you from covetousness.

But what if you are a believer? What if you are here today, and you are a believer, and you say, "This is my sin." "I am struggling with this." "Covetousness is my sin." How do you respond to it? Well, of course, you respond to it by applying to the lord for grace, and you respond to it by faith, and by prayer, and by self-examination, and by studying contentment. But let me suggest for you, very quickly, ten particular things that we can do in response to this sin in our lives.

The first thing we need is self-awareness, and self-examination. We need to be asking ourselves, every once in a while, "Am I coveting?" "What am I coveting?" and, "Why am I coveting this?" If we are not asking ourselves that, every once in a while, at least we are leaving ourselves open to some big problems.

Secondly, we need to realize that we live in a society that wants us to be covetous. We live in a society, a consumer, materialist culture that says greed is good. Covetousness is normal. Do more of it. You don't have to have your television set on for more than ten minutes to realize that your society wants you

to covet. It wants you to have things that you don't have now. It wants you to be fixated on getting those things that you don't have now. Our society is not friend to contentment, and we need to stop and remember that every once in a while. Its not that you're going crazy. It's that you're being bombarded from every side, having someone tell you, "Don't seek contentment." "Don't not covet." No, you need to do that.

Thirdly, we need to pause and have some godly reflection. We need to think about the relative poverty of earthly blessings. You can have that, yeah; you can have that. But the law of diminishing returns for one day means that you don't even care if you have it. We need to think about the fact that God often heaps His greatest blessings upon those who have the least in terms of earthly blessings. Have you ever seen someone like that? They haven't been given much of this world, but they have heaven in their hearts; and frankly, it shows. You know people like that? You need to look at them from time to time, and say, "Lord, grant me those kinds of desires." "Grant me that kind of contentment." "That's the kind of person I want to be like."

Fourthly, we need to make a conscious effort to limit occasions for coveting, and come up with strategies for checking evil desires. If there is a situation in which you find yourself, over and over, struggling with coveting, don't go there. And if you are wrestling with a specific evil desire, come up with schemes to combat it. I had a friend who had a relationship. It began as a spiritual, helping relationship with a woman in need, which was not his wife. It ended with him really wanting to have more than a spiritual, helping relationship with her. He was happily married. He had a wonderful wife. He had a wonderful family. And I tell you, he pulled out a notebook, and he started writing down all the things that would happen to him if he pursued that relationship. Everything from losing his wife, and being kicked out of the church, and everything else that he could think of bad. And he argued with himself to pull himself out of an inappropriate emotional relationship. Thank heavens, it had gone no further. But he came up with strategies to check those evil desires.

Fifth, we need to cultivate contentment. We need to determine to be happy in every circumstance, to be content with what we have. Do you believe, do you really believe, that the circumstance that you are in now, is the best possible circumstance under God's providence for you? Oh, that's hard, friends. There are plenty of circumstances that people are in, in this room right now, where it is a challenge to believe that this situation, this circumstance is the best one for me to be in. But, think about it. Your Heavenly Father has ordered this. Do you really believe that this is the best circumstance for you? If you don't, you are vulnerable to covetousness. Have you paused to think that the more you have, the more you will give account for? We need to cultivate contentment in every way we can. Sixth, we need to fix our desires on wholesome and lawful objects. Did you know that there is a passage in the Bible that commands us to covet? First Corinthians, 12:31. "Covet the gifts," Paul says. "Desire the gifts of the Holy Spirit." We ought

to be coveting those things wrought in us by the Holy Spirit. We ought to be longing to see the spirit working in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. We ought to have inordinate desires to see those things implanted in us. And you know what? The Bible says that why we don't is that we haven't asked, because the Heavenly Father will give us these things. And so, it's not enough to not covet the world. You have to desire that which is right. There has to be a corresponding desire for that which is good and wholesome, to combat covetousness.

Seventh: faith is necessary to combat covetousness. We have to trust God's providence. The root cause of covetousness is either a dissatisfaction with God's providence, or a distrust in it, or both; not being satisfied with what God has given you, or not trusting that God really is seeking your best interest. That is the root cause. And so, faith in God, trust in His providence, is a great weapon against covetousness. Faith is secure of His particular care.

Eight: we need to pray for God's grace. We say that we believe that prayer is a means of grace. Well, we need to pray for a heavenly mind. We need to ask that the lord would give us grace to want the first things, the best things.

Ninth: we need to cultivate our desire of God. In Psalm 63, David is in the wilderness. He has lost everything from an earthly perspective. He's been run out from his city. He's been run out from the capitol. He's been dethroned, as it were. There is civil war on. And in the midst of that Psalm he says, Lord, Your loving kindness is better than life. I want you like a thirsty man, a man who is about to die of thirst, needs water. That is how I want You. You can take everything else from me. I want You. Do we cultivate that kind of a love for God, in our own lives?

Finally, tenth: we have to cultivate love. Have you ever thought of it? Love, in many ways, is the opposite of covetousness. Think about it. Love seeks the best interest of another even at our own expense. Covetousness, on the other hand, desires to take from another in order to serve our own interest. So the cultivation of love, in our lives, is a weapon against covetousness.

Now, my friends, we need every, every, help we can get to fight against this sin, because this sin can lay hold of life and destroy us from the inside out. But, above all, this command teaches us the need for grace, and that grace can only be supplied in Jesus Christ. May we all apply to Him for it today. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank thee for Your word. We ask that You would hear our prayers, and teach us, by Your Spirit, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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