The Ten Commandments
Sermons from the Heidelberg Catechism

Rev. G. Van Reenen

"Many ministers have written sermons on the fifty-two Lord's Days as we find them in our Heidelberg Catechism. One of these ministers and servants of the Most High, is the late Rev. G. Van Reenen, of the Netherlands. When he was not able to preach any more because of a throat ailment, God inclined his heart to write sermons, and work while it was day. This work he continued until the day of his death in the year 1946. Rev. Van Reenen has written these sermons for the common people. In all these sermons he breathes the spirit of humility and self-denial. Throughout all these sermons he indicates the necessity of knowing by experience these three important parts, misery, redemption, and gratitude, as he himself was not a stranger thereof. Rev. Van Reenen does not know that his Catechism sermons and others have been translated into the English language. He confessed in his life not to be worthy of any honor or praise; that we may then by grace give all honor and praise to Israel's God and King, saying with the Psalmist, "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name give glory, for Thy mercy and for Thy truth's sake." Psalm 115:1. (Pastor J. Van Zweden).


"THE TENTH COMMANDMENT"

Psalter No.305 st. 1,2.
Psalter No.71 st. 2,3.
Psalter No.64 st. 2,3.
Psalter No.435 st. 9

XLIV. LORD'S DAY

“One thing have I desired of the Lord,” thus, my dear hearers, the man after God's own heart testifies in the precious psalm we have sung.

And that one desire of David was a worthy desire. What did he desire? “That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple.”

That is a blessed desire — always to dwell with the Lord! It is already so wonderful when the child of God may be with God for a moment to pour out his heart before Him, to unburden his anxious mind, to show Him his love and affection, to thank Him for the
benefits enjoyed, or even to find rest for a moment from the war he must wage or from
the way he must go. Such a moment with God is truly wonderful. But to dwell with Him,
to be with Him for ever, of that, indeed, we may say, “Blessed are they that dwell in Thy
house: they will be still praising Thee.” Even the desire itself to dwell with the Lord is so
very pleasant when it is lively, when that sincere warm longing is there to be absent
from the body and to be present with the Lord to behold His beauty in His temple.

This desire is also an unusual desire. If we notice what men live for and strive after, how
few we see who have the desire of the poet. No one by nature wants to dwell with God.
By nature we are enemies of God. We rather wished there were no God.

We find David's one wish only in God's children as a fruit of regeneration, as a mark of
grace.

If now we could but say in truth that this one desire is the only desire that lives in our
heart, we would be happy. But together with that one desire David had a thousand other
desires, and so have we. And these desires are in direct contrast to that one desire.
They are sinful desires that embitter our lives, and that would cause our downfall, if the
Lord did not prevent it. I need but mention the name Bathsheba to you, and you will
know what unclean desires lived in David's heart beside that one.

Alas, our heart is as a well in which one unclean desire rises after another.

And in regard to all those unclean and sinful thoughts God is implacable, He wants to
destroy them. He casts a bulwark against them in the commandment that now asks our
attention.

You will find our text in Exodus 20:17. “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou
shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox,
nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's.”

Upon these words our Catechetical instruction is based as you will find recorded in the
Heidelberg Catechism:

**XLIV. LORD’S DAY**

**Q. 113. What doth the tenth commandment require of us?**

**A. That even the smallest inclination or thought, contrary to any of God's
commandments, never rise in our hearts; but that at all times we hate all sin with
our whole heart, and delight in all righteousness.**

**Q. 114. But can those who are converted to God perfectly keep these
commandments?**
A. No: but even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of
this obedience; yet so, that with a sincere resolution they begin to live, not only
according to some, but all the commandments of God.

Q. 115. Why will God then have the ten commandments so strictly preached,
since no man in this life can keep them?

A. First, that all our lifetime we may learn more and more to know our sinful
nature, and thus become the more earnest in seeking the remission of sin, and
righteousness in Christ; likewise, that we constantly endeavor and pray to God
for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we may become more and more conformable
to the Image of God, till we arrive at the perfection proposed to us, in a life to
come.

Dear hearers!

The Apostle Paul says that the law is “spiritual.” If we could up to this time doubt the
spirituality of the law, the last commandment, which we must now consider, would cure
you of this doubt. For this tenth commandment, which says, “Thou shalt not covet,”
plainly shows that the jurisdiction of the law extends not only over our external words
and deeds, but also over the innermost thoughts and tendencies of our soul.

This is an evidence of the divinity of the law. Human laws can govern our words and our
deeds, but our thoughts and desires are free. An earthly judge can not know and
therefore can not judge them. But the Lord searches every heart and understands all
the imaginations of men.

After the highest Lawgiver had proclaimed to us in the previous commandments: “Thou
shalt not kill, nor commit adultery, nor steal, nor bear false witness,” He adds in the final
commandment, “Thou shalt not covet.”

This tenth commandment is sometimes considered the key with which all the other
commandments are opened. It is also called the touchstone which reveals all that does
not truly satisfy the Lord's demand. By this tenth commandment the hypocrite's mask is
removed, and the whitened sepulcher is opened so that the dead man's bones are seen. It
is compared to the arrow that fatally smote Ahab between the joints of the harness.
Against the sharpness of this command neither the off-white garment of the papist, nor
the phylacteries of the Pharisees, nor the cunning of one who would enter heaven by
his good works is of any avail. “Thou shalt not covet” is a blow with which Moses breaks
the entire structure of our self-righteousness. It tears the spider's web of our hope to be
justified by our works, and places us all uncovered before Him Who demands that we
shall serve Him in spirit and in truth. Yea, this tenth commandment is a scourge which
drives us out of ourselves to Calvary, to the feet of Him Who is the end of the law to
everyone that believes.

But, come, beloved, permit me to give a short explanation of the last commandment of
the law of God, in accordance with the 113th Question and Answer.

We have told you before that we do not agree with the doctrine of the Papacy who divide this tenth commandment into two commandments. They do this to palliate the union of the first two commandments, and thus to extenuate their image-worship. When we spoke about the divisions of the law (Lord's Day 34) we gave our reasons why we hold that this last commandment is one single commandment, namely because it speaks only of coveting, while the first and second commandments speak of two distinct sins, namely, idolatry and image-worship.

“Thou shalt not covet.” What is it to covet? Coveting is a passion, an active power of the soul to have something the possession of which it deems desirable. Coveting is desiring.

God Himself has created desires in men. Hence all desiring is not forbidden.

Dear hearers, I wish that all of you were filled with heartfelt and fervent desires to God, Who alone is good, to Christ, Who alone can save, to all that is necessary in order that you may know, love, and glorify the Triune God. If you do not learn to desire this, you will be eternally lost.

We may also desire “natural things,” such as food and drink, clothing and shelter, without which we, consisting of body and soul, cannot live. Such a desire was also present in the father of us all, in Adam before he fell, and even in Christ, when He was hungry and thirsty.

There is also a sinful desire. Through our fall in Adam we are entirely depraved, we are become slaves of sin. Our desires naturally reach out to evil.

This general depravity James calls “lust.” To distinguish it from the good desires, evil desires are called lusts, as, for instance, the lusts of the heart, the lusts of the body, or of the flesh, evil lusts, worldly lusts or the world and its lust. See 1 John 2:16, 17 where John says, “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof.”

Out of this evil principle come the sins against the tenth commandment, and that in various steps and degrees.

Out of our evil mind come evil lusts and sinful desires, sometimes without the consent of our will, yea, against our will and desire. Then God's child cries out against it and prays with David, Wash me, make me pure within.” Would to God that it were always so, that we would always pray and strive against it.

But alas, so often our will consents to it, though with hesitation, and often we suffer those vile lusts and evil desires in our heart with some pleasure, if not with our full
approval. That is, so to speak, the first step to the sinful act.

If, having taken this first step, we would draw our affections away from sin immediately, — but, alas, we often begin to agree with that sinful desire, we cherish it, we take pleasure in thinking about it.

And then one step more leads us to death. That is what the Apostle James means when he writes (James 1:14, 15): “But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin, and sin, when it is finished bringeth forth death. “Thus it was with Achan, the thief. He first looked at that beautiful garment and those pieces of silver — ah, it was money he could very well use, he could earn more money with it, he could give some to the poor. His desire became strong, and, he took it.

“Except the law said, “Thou shalt not covet,” I had not known lust (to be sin)” says Paul. From this word of the Apostle it is evident that even the first beginning of coveting, yea, covetousness itself is sin. That sinful lusts and desires are sin, Paul knew from the other commandments; but if the tenth commandment had not been there, covetousness, the root of sin, had not been touched.

And what may we not covet?

We may not covet what is of another, whether it be alive or lifeless, rational or irrational, when it is of another, when it belongs to someone else. The desire to possess it, even in a just way, may not enter our thoughts. That, my hearers, exceeds all the ethics of the Pharisees and the heathens.

Hear what the Instructor teaches concerning this in the 113th Answer, “That even the smallest inclination or thought, contrary to any of God's commandments, never rise in our hearts.” Do you see that even covetousness in its first tendencies, even in regenerate persons truly is sin and violates the law of God?

The law demands obedience with all the powers of soul and body. God demands moral perfection and cannot approve anything contrary to it. And because His law is spiritual, it forbids all contamination of the spirit by fleshly lusts. And because covetousness is the cause of sin, it must itself be sin.

This doctrine finds no opposition with the child of God, but rather whole-hearted concurrence. And since they see their deadly impotence in regard to the perfectly just demands of the law, they testify with Paul: “For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin.” (Rom. 7:14).

“But that at all times we hate sin with our whole heart, and delight in all righteousness,” our Instructor concludes his answer.

God wills that man, and especially His people, shall be content. Child of God, the Lord
wants us to be content and satisfied with that which the Lord gave and added unto us, without murmuring or complaining about our state, without looking at and coveting that which is not ours. He wants us to love our neighbor with all the faculties of soul and body, so that we do not at all begrudge him what God has given him, nor envy him or covet what is his.

But, I hear you say, then we would have to be perfect. Precisely, that we should be.

God demands moral perfection, and nothing less. God is a perfect Being, and therefore He demands perfection. “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” (Matt. 5:48) “Be ye holy, for I am holy,” says the Lord, and thus each of His commandments declares.

The Lord suffers nothing impure in us. God can not overlook a single inclination against one of His commandments. When only in thought you work on the Lord's Day, although your hands do nothing, when one angry thought arises within you, or one covetous thought toward your neighbor's wife or property arises in you, although you do not touch it with your hand or see it with your eye, you have transgressed the law of your God.

Nor will the Lord condone any defects. Do all that God commands you, but if there is any defect in it, God will disallow all your work. Although an Israelite brought the best of his cattle or sheep for sacrifice, if there was even a small blemish on it, it was not acceptable. “Offer it now to thy governor if it please him,” says the Lord.

Neither does the Lord want forced obedience. Keep all God's commandments, but do it because you must, do it because you dare not neglect it, and — gone is your obedience. God wants no servile, but childlike obedience. We must not be coerced into obedience, but we should obey willingly out of filial love, otherwise it is not pleasing to God.

He wills that we shall be perfect from the crown of our head to the sole of the feet, from our cradle to the grave, without and within in body and soul, in your acts, but also in your words and thoughts. That is the fatherly love of God.

Is that the fatherly love of God to demand the utmost of us? Certainly, it is that, dear child of God, for the purpose of this demand is the perfect happiness of God's children. Nor would the child of God be able or willing to be content with anything less than perfect obedience to all God's commandments. The demand of the Father is the child's ideal. And if that moral perfection is not your desire and your striving, you are not a child.

“But,” asks our Instructor in Question 114, “can those who are converted to God perfectly keep these commandments?”

Notice, my hearers, he does not ask whether natural man, or the unregenerate or unconverted man can fulfill the demand of the law. In the second Lord’s Day the
Instructor had finished with the unconverted in this matter. There he was said to be “prone by nature to hate God and his neighbor, and to transgress God's commandments with thoughts, words and deeds.”

Here the question is asked whether those who are converted to God can satisfy the law's demand. Those converted to God are those who have experienced the miracle the Catechism speaks of in the thirty-third Lord's Day, namely, the mortification of the old, and the quickening of the new man, hence of that sincere sorrow of heart, that we have provoked God by our sins; and more and more to hate and flee from them, and that sincere joy of heart in God through Christ, and with love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works.

Notice well that the question is not whether those converted keep these commandments perfectly. But the question is whether they can, whether the possibility exists.

Hear now his humble confession in Answer 114.

“No, truly, converted people do not keep the law.”

“What then is the difference between the converted and the unconverted if neither of them keep the law?” someone may ask.
Our answer is that the converted person has three things, which the unconverted one lacks.

(a) He has a small beginning of this obedience. In the heart of every gracious person you will find something of the love to God and to the neighbor. That beginning reveals itself in the fruit. That fruit is obedience. One of God's children may be farther advanced than another, there are steps in the dispensation of grace. There are children, young men, men, and fathers. But each of them has this small beginning, although even in the most advanced it is but small in comparison to their ideal and in comparison to the perfection they shall attain in heaven. Of that small beginning the unconverted person has nothing. At his best he has a dead piety which God abhors.

(b) The converted person has a sincere endeavor to live not only according to some, but to all the commandments of God. Although they must complain that they are the chief of sinners, nevertheless they are as runners in the race of virtue. And now they sincerely confess that they are not perfect. They are no perfectionists who boast that they are above the complaint of Paul in Romans 7. No, indeed, they do not belong to the so-called perfectionists. Still they strive for perfection. Every time they stumble, they rise again and press on. After every wound they receive they take the sword again. After every surprise attack they become more watchful, and as burnt children they learn to fear the fire. This is not so with the world. A few sins which harm or dishonor him he hates. He has delight in this or that virtue, that gives him profit or honor, but to live according to all the commandments of God and to strive after such a life, that does not please him.

(c) God's child also has a prayer. Whereas again and again they become aware that they are carnal, sold under sin, they often plead for the help of God's Spirit. (Later we will say more about this.)

But "why will God then have the ten commandments so strictly preached, since no man in this life can keep them?" the Catechism asks in Question 115.

This is the voice of that happy Christendom who rather hear the preaching of the glad gospel than of the rigid, gloomy law. Also the Antinomian agrees with the question, "Why preach the Law, since no one on earth can keep it? Moreover, are not God's people, the converted ones, made free from the law? Is it not all grace? Is Christ not the end of the law to everyone that believes? Is He not our sanctification before God? Why then preach the ten commandments so strictly?" they ask.

The answer the Instructor gives is very much to the point. In it he shows the usefulness of the constant preaching of the law. With the blessing of the Lord, it can yield a five-fold blessing to the child of God. Permit me to elucidate this in a few words.

(A) It is useful to further discovery of self. "That all our life-time we may learn more and more to know our sinful nature," says the Instructor.
Dear hearers, when we are first brought upon the way of life, it is our sinful words and deeds that fill us with fear and sorrow before the Lord. But we are still blind to our total depravity. Besides the feeling of guilt a self-righteous Pharisee lives in our heart. What a high opinion we still cherish of ourselves. What an unmerciful judgment do we pass upon others! What little need we have for complete redemption! Therefore we need further discovery. That will cause the Pharisee to die, then we become the chief of sinners, then we lose our high opinion of ourselves, then our judgment upon others becomes more charitable, and we feel the need for more discovering light.

And whence shall we receive that further discovery? How shall we learn that we are black as an Ethiopian? To that end the constant, strict preaching of the ten commandments is a means in God's hand. Continually that mirror must be held before us, for that law discovers, casts down, and breaks down. Yea, the law causes us to be disappointed with ourselves, it causes us to sigh, "I did not know that my soul so cleaved to the dust." And that is not pleasant, but it is very beneficial.

(B) This preaching of the law is useful in driving us out to Christ. "And thus become the more earnest in seeking the remission of sin and righteousness in Christ," continues the Catechism.

Remission of sins and the robe of righteousness, what blessed privileges they are, especially for one who knows what misery lacking those blessings can cause.

Remission of sins and righteousness, those two things he seeks to acquire. But, how does he seek them? He seeks to acquire them by practicing virtue and duty. If he does not acquire it in that way, he tries to arouse God's compassion by his tears and prayers.

But the strict preaching of the law teaches him that he can make debts, but cannot pay them; that he can arouse God's anger, but not His compassion, that his robe of virtues is as filthy rags before God.

When he has learned these things he goes to another for forgiveness and covering, and that is to the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore the preaching of the law is so necessary. That law drives our patient out of himself to Golgotha. That law is the avenger of blood that hunts him and causes him to flee to the city of refuge. God's concerned people have learned something of this, but still the law must be preached to them continually so that they may be the "more earnest" to seek remission and righteousness in Christ.

(C) The preaching of the law is useful in causing us to follow after sanctification. When we have found remission of sins in Jesus' blood, and covering by the righteousness of Christ, and rest at the foot of Jesus' cross, a great danger looms, and that is that we lose our zeal and watchfulness, that we rest as if our warfare were accomplished. In Gen. 49:15 we read of Issachar that when he saw the rest that it was good he bowed his shoulder to bear, like a strong ass, and became a servant unto tribute. Many a little one in grace has fallen into that snare in a spiritual manner. That is why the Roman
Catholics and others who seek to be saved by their works are much more zealous than those who were saved by grace.

That is not right, my brothers and sisters! "Let us go on to perfection" is the watchword of faith. To hasten on in the way of sanctification is the choice of the new life. Your perfection is the purpose of redemption.

There is much misunderstanding in this matter. Sanctification has a twofold meaning. Christ is our sanctification outside of us, before God. Therefore He beheld not iniquity in His Jacob, neither has He seen perverseness in His Israel. But there is also a renewal after the image of God, a being conformed to the law of God.

Therefore the preaching of the law is necessary to cause you to see your shortcomings and to hasten on from the rest at the foot of the cross to the crown of perfection.

(D) The constant preaching of the ten commandments is necessary in order that we might lead a prayerful life. In our answer we first spoke of giving diligence in the way of sanctification. However, we soon find that we lack all necessary power to continue in the way of sanctification. Yea, instead of proceeding we recede.

But now the demand of the law drives God's children to prayer. Therefore they sigh: Lord, Thou hast commanded us to keep Thy precepts diligently. O that my ways were directed to keep Thy statutes. "Yea, they pray," O let Thy Spirit be my constant aid, that all my ways may ever be directed to keep Thy statutes. Make me to go in the path of Thy commandments." And another sighs,

"Lord, to me Thy ways make known,
Guide In truth and teach Thou me."

Come, beloved, let us sing it together prayerfully: Psalter No. 64 st. 2,3.

Dear hearers!

Thus we have again preached those ten commandments to you. What a great privilege it was for me that I might do it, and for you that you might hear it.

It leaves you without excuse. "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good."

And now put your hand into your own bosom, and prove yourself in regard to that which was preached to you about those ten commandments.

How is it with your Christian contentment, whereby you do not covet that which is your neighbors?

Thou shalt not bear false witness, nor falsify any man's words, nor be a slanderer, but always defend and promote as much as you are able, the honor and good character of
your neighbor." How do you stand in regard to this commandment?

Thou shalt not steal, nor commit adultery, nor kill, but show due respect for your neighbors' possessions, purity and life. How do you stand in regard to these commandments?

Do you so honor your father and mother and all in authority over you both in church and state as we have outlined for you?

And how is it with your Sabbath observance, and with the hallowing of God's great Name? Did you ever commit image-worship and did you ever serve another God but the Lord Jehovah?

Dare you swear: All these have I kept from my youth up?

What a mountain of sin and guilt there is to your account, sins which God knows, and guilt which is recorded in God's book.

And how shall you answer Him? For a day, an hour, a moment shall come when you shall be summoned to appear before that great Law-giver. Then He shall bring to your mind that constant preaching of His ten commandments. Then He shall try your thoughts words and deeds according to what you have heard of them. Oh, sinner, how dreadful that will be! You will stand there with fear and trembling if you have no Redeemer for your guilt and no God for your heart.

Therefore, O sinner, learn even yet to bow your knees at the mount of reconciliation, in humility before God before that day shall come upon you as a thief in the night, and you should sink away to the habitation of him to whose voice you have listened. To that end the Lord grant you His Spirit and grace.

Well, people of God, both small and great, beginners and more advanced. We too were privileged again to tarry in the spirit at Mount Sinai for a few weeks, and again to meditate on the ten words of the law. What a privilege was ours that we might stand there as children of a better covenant.

What the law demanded was nothing strange to us. The law gave utterance to that which is engraved in our hearts.

But the preaching of the law demands that we should live in accordance with it, and that we should be conformed to it. And if it is with you as it is with me, then we both must complain that we do not conform to its demand.

We may not deny that we have a small beginning of it, and that we also have the desire to live according to all His commandments. Our choice is perfect. Still our earnest endeavor should be more manifest in the fruit of our life.
Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth.

Let sin not have dominion over you; for ye are not under the law, but under grace.

Be narrow of conscience, but wide of heart.

Seek on Calvary what Sinai demands of you.

And remember that the mount of perfection is attainable.

(E) For the constant preaching of the law arouses a longing for that perfection. Ah, child of grace, when these ten commandments are strictly preached to us, and we constantly see our nonconformity, and whereas it is the desire of everyone who is born of God to be perfect as God is perfect, not in degree but in essence, and whereas we see, by the light of the law, that that perfection is not obtainable in this life, but that, according to our Instructor, we shall arrive at the perfection proposed to us, in a life to come, and that we shall then be satisfied again with God's likeness, then we can scarcely refrain from sighing, “To depart and be with Christ is far better. Oh, come eternity, would God I were with thee.” Is it not so with you?

Then, dear child, the preaching of the law will come to an end, then the warfare will be accomplished, then we shall be again as we were in the state of rectitude, yea, much more glorious!

Then we shall have that law in our hearts again, then we shall never again need to bow our guilty heads for that law! Then we shall be like the angels, yea, we shall be like our Christ.

And if then we are asked how we attained that height, we shall also name, besides the precious Gospel, the law, as a means in God's hand.

And then it will be Moses, the schoolmaster, the angel of peace, who will give us the palmbranch of victory.

And then with all the blessed, we shall sing to all eternity the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb, saying, “Great and marvelous are Thy works, Lord God Almighty, just and true are Thy ways, Thou King of saints.” (Rev. 15:3).

Amen.
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