



The Ten Commandments

(46) The Tenth Commandment

(1) You Shall Not Covet

Exodus 20:17

Colossians 3:5

Romans 7:7

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This evening we begin our study of the Tenth Commandment. We have been at this study of the Ten Commandments for a while. We began in January 2018. My justification for such a long series is that covering the Ten Commandments thoroughly covers pretty much everything that the Bible teaches about the Christian life. We have covered a great variety of subjects. But we are coming close to the end of this series of sermons. One more sermon after this one. So this evening we begin on commandment #10 which is, "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 is your neighbor's."

One of the interesting factoids in the literature is that there is nothing like this in the ethical systems of the nations that surrounded ancient Israel. Some biblical scholars like to compare the Ten Commandments with the moral laws of the pagan nations and for most of the Ten Commandments there is something similar in the pagan writings on morality. Every nation had laws against killing and stealing and adultery. But the only place that coveting is forbidden is in the Tenth Commandment. What this means is that the Ten Commandments are unique in their concern for the inner life of the people of God.

For that is what the Tenth Commandment makes explicit. As we have proceeded through our study of the commandments we have seen

again and again that when we understand each of the commands in the light of the rest of the Bible it is clear that they are all concerned with what goes on in our inner life as well as our actions. But the Tenth Commandment makes this explicit. It is concerned with our inner life. Coveting happens in our hearts. We have also seen that there is a great deal of overlap between many of the commandments. Adultery is a form of theft. Bearing false witness is a form of murder. Most of the time when you break one command, you are breaking at least two or three of them. Well the Tenth Commandment is connected to all of the other commandments. The Tenth Commandment makes explicit the heart concern of all of the commandments. Coveting has to do with sinful desires. And we can break any of the other commands by sinful desires.

The Heidelberg Catechism expresses this idea in its exposition of the Tenth Commandment. "Q. 113 What is God's will for you in the tenth commandment? A. That not even the slightest desire or thought contrary to any one of God's commandments should ever arise in our hearts. Rather, with all our hearts we should always hate sin and delight in all righteousness."

The point is that God is as concerned about our inner life as he is about our words and our actions. That of course requires that God is able to police our inner life. For the Tenth Commandment to be meaningful, it requires that the giver and enforcer of that command knows what we are thinking. To regulate coveting, it is necessary that God can hold us accountable for coveting and that means that he has to know every instance of coveting and keep a record of it. The Tenth Commandment tells us that God cares about our thoughts and attitudes and desires and that he has the wherewithal to hold us accountable for them. It requires that God's knowledge extends to our inner life. It assumes what is taught in Psalm 139:1-2, "O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar." And verses 23-24 "Search me, O God, and know my hearts! Try me and know my thought! And see if there by any grievous way in me and lead me in the way everlasting."

God is concerned with far more than just our actions. He is concerned about who we really are as people whose inner lives are transparent to him. He is concerned with who we really are in our inner being. He is not satisfied with the image that we choose to project. He is not satisfied with external compliance to his commands. He is concerned with all of us. He is concerned about our true self – the self that is always somewhat hidden from other people – the self that even we ourselves do not know exhaustively. God requires that our complete being be devoted to him. The Tenth Commandment means that, God requires that we tend to what goes on in our hearts. As Proverbs 4:23 says, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.”

The Tenth Commandment forbids coveting. Coveting is a desire. Coveting has to do with our desires. But it is not all desires. There are many desires that are not covetous. Indeed desiring is tied up with being human. God created us as desiring creatures. It is impossible not to have desires. Life is largely about the satisfaction of our desires. We are made to work and have goals and that is motivated by desires. We are created with the desire for pleasure and for companionship and for accomplishment and for comfort and for food and all kinds of other things. God made his creation to be a wonderful place full of beauty and all manner of pleasurable things and we are created to desire those things. Jesus, as a human being, had all the legitimate desires – the desire for friends, the desire for pleasure, the desire for accomplishment and rest and all the rest, but he never sinned. Coveting has to do with our desires, but it is about sinful desires. There are legitimate desires and there are sinful desires.

In this way Buddhism is very different from Christianity. In Buddhism the goal is to learn to be free from desire. Suffering related to desire and so the answer to suffering in Buddhism is to learn how not to desire. That is how, it is thought, to have peace and freedom from pain. The Bible has a very different way of thinking about desire and about suffering. Life as God designed it has a great deal to do with the satisfaction of legitimate desires. Suffering is not to be escaped but endured with patience and trust in God’s wisdom and love. Desire is not to be squelched but controlled. And this is where the prohibition of coveting

comes in. The Tenth Commandment is about controlling out desires. It presupposes the Fall because of which our desires are disordered and unrestrained.

So the Tenth Commandment says that we are not to covet our neighbor's house. This does not mean that we should not desire to have a house if we do not have one, or even that we should not have a dream for the kind of house we would one day like to have. A young couple gets married and all they can afford is a small apartment, but their dream is one day to have a nice house in the country. That is not coveting. Coveting is desiring your neighbor's house in an unloving way. Let's say that your neighbor has a beautiful house and you are delighted that he has such a nice house and you would someday like to have a nice house too. That is not coveting. It is coveting if your desire is envious – if you resent the fact that he has a nicer house than you do or if you try to get his house in a way that is unscrupulous.

The kind of thing that is in mind when the Tenth Commandment says that we are not to covet our neighbor's house is illustrated in the story of Ahab and Naboth's vineyard. We have looked at that story to illustrate what it means to bear false witness, but it is also a good illustration of coveting. Naboth's vineyard was next door to Ahab's property and Ahab thought it would be nice to expand his property by buying Naboth's vineyard. Now just having that desire was not wrong. It became wrong however, when Ahab's desire for that property became so strong that he was not willing to take no for an answer. Naboth refused to sell his property to Ahab because it had been given to his family by God when the land of Canaan was divided up and each family got a parcel of land that was intended to support that family through the generations.

But Ahab wanted that property anyway and became sullen and angry because Naboth would not sell it to him. 1 Kings 21:4 says of Ahab, "And he lay down on his bed and turned away his face and would eat no food." Here we have a desire that has become covetous. The land was off limits to him and still he wanted it and he wanted it so badly that refused to eat and get out of bed. Furthermore he agreed to Jezebel's

plan to falsely accuse Naboth of a capital crime so that he could be executed so that Ahab could get the land.

This story illustrates coveting among other sins. It became coveting the moment that Ahab was not content to take no for an answer. The bare desire for Naboth's land was not coveting, but the moment that Ahab was not willing to control his desire and accept the fact that the land was off limits to him, the desire became a sinful desire – a violation of the Tenth Commandment.

The next part of the Tenth Commandment says that we are not to covet our neighbor's wife. Here the Tenth Commandment is describing desiring something that is completely off limits. We are not allowed to desire our neighbor's wife. If we are married we are only to desire our own wife. If we are not married we may desire to have a wife or even to desire a specific godly single woman as a wife, but we are never to desire someone else's wife. This is an example of coveting which is desiring something that is off limits – something that is sinful. And we can extrapolate from that that the Tenth Commandment forbids the desire to sin. We are to control our desires.

So basically what we have then in the Tenth Commandment is a prohibition of desires that are too strong and a prohibition desires for things that are off limits. A perfectly legitimate desire becomes coveting when it becomes too strong. If we would like to buy our neighbor's vineyard – that simple desire is not a problem. It becomes a problem if we are not willing to take no for an answer and if we get all depressed because he is not willing to sell it to us. That kind of desire sometimes leads to a willingness to harm our neighbor to get his vineyard. And you can apply this principle to any desire that is out of control – any desire which is not willing to take no for an answer – any desire that is unwilling to accept the fact that in God's providence it is not good or necessary for you to have that desire met at this time.

But also coveting includes the desire to sin. The Tenth Commandment teaches us that God is concerned about our desires and so a desire to punch someone in the face or to have sex with someone who is not your wife or husband or to take something that does not belong to you

are all examples of coveting. It is sinful to have the desire even if you do not follow through with satisfying that desire.

So that is where we come by reflecting directly on the words of the Tenth Commandment. The rest of the list of things that we may not covet are the same as we have discussed in principle.

What we will do now is fill out our understanding of coveting by considering some of how the rest of Scripture deals with it. For instance, the Scriptures prohibit envy. Envy is a form of coveting because envy is resentment because someone else has something that you wish you had. The Bible explicitly forbids envy. For instance Galatians 5:26 says, "Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another." Romans 1 also mentions envy in Paul's description of mankind in rebellion against God. Romans 1:29 he says of those who live apart from God. "They are full of envy."

Envy is a desire for something that someone else has that is mixed with resentment or hatred against that someone. So someone is outgoing and has lots of friends and you are shy and not very popular with the in-crowd and so you dislike the popular person and even would enjoy seeing him make a social gaff which would cause others to turn away from him or her. Or someone you know has a well-paying job and is financially comfortable and you have a less well-paying job and have to struggle financially and you feel resentment towards the person who has it so easy and would take pleasure in seeing them taken down a peg or two.

A biblical example of envy is Joseph's brothers who were envious of the fact that Joseph was Jacob's favorite and that envy led them to sell him into slavery. Another biblical example is the envy of the religious leaders of the Jews towards Jesus. Matthew 27:18 says of Pilate, "For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up."

Envy is a form of hatred. It is the opposite of love. Love rejoices with those who rejoice, while envy does the opposite; it is resentful of those who rejoice. It is a desire for something that someone else has which is mixed with resentment or hatred of that person. It is a desire that is poisoned and destructive. It is a disordered desire. And that is what

coveting is about – disordered desires – sinful desires – desires that are not submissive to the will of God.

Another way that the Bible develops the idea of coveting in its teaching on greed. Greed and coveting are closely related. In fact, the Greek word that is translated as greed is sometimes translated as covetous. Greed is a desire that is too strong. One definition of greed is an “excessive or reprehensible desire to acquire; covetousness.” (Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, p.688) Another definition is “the excessive and all-consuming desire for material wealth.” (Pocket dictionary of Ethics, p.48) Jesus said of the Pharisees in Luke 11:39 that they “cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside are full of greed and wickedness.”

Here we have the idea again of a disordered desire. Greed is an excessive desire for material things. It is an all-consuming desire for material wealth. It is a desire that is too strong. And the call of the Tenth Commandment then is to restrain our desires for money and things. It is to keep our desires in check and under control. It is to regulate our desires. As we have seen having desires is an inescapable characteristic of being human. It is impossible to be without desires. And the desire for money and things is part of that. But they must be controlled. They must not dominate our lives. They must not conflict with what the Bible teaches about how our desires are to be ordered.

This is an important part of the biblical teaching concerning desires. We are to desire some things more than other things. Some desirable things are more important than other desirable things. We are to desire some things with all our hearts, and we are to desire other things with less than all our hearts and there are yet other things that we are not to desire at all. How we order our desires is a moral question. The kinds of things that we prioritize in our lives is a reflection of the kind of people we are, and God is concerned with what kind of people we are.

So we are to desire things in a certain order. God is at the very top of that list. It is significant that in Colossians 3:5 Paul teaches that covetousness is idolatry. What that means is that if we desire anything else more than we desire God we are worshipping that thing instead of God. What that means is that the First Commandment and the Tenth

Commandment are really two ways of saying the same thing. The First Commandment says that we are not to have any other gods besides the true God of the Bible. The Tenth Commandment says that our desires for other things must not be stronger than our desire to please God. They amount to the same thing. That is why Paul can equate covetousness with idolatry. We must have our desires in the proper order and the proper order has God at the top of it.

We see this in Jesus' summary of the Ten Commandments. Jesus summarizes the first table of the Ten Commandments by saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). We covet when we love something besides God with all our heart, soul and mind or even when we love something besides God with more of our heart, soul and mind than we love God. What we love and what we desire are really the same thing. And anything other than loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength is coveting. It is a disordered desire.

The summary of the second table of the law also speaks to the ordering of our desires. After loving God, the next most important thing is that we love our neighbor as ourselves. The Bible assumes that we will love ourselves and it does not condemn that. But it insists that we are to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.

But we do not do that by nature. By nature we love ourselves more than our neighbors and that also leads to disordered desires. We are to desire our neighbor's wellbeing as much as our own wellbeing. Our desires for his good and for our own good are to be equal. And what that means in practice is that we will be willing to make sacrifices for the good of our neighbor. We will desire his or her wellbeing so much that we will be willing to sacrifice some of our desires in order to bless our neighbor. That is what it means to love our neighbor as our self. Paul puts it like this in Philippians 2:4 "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

If we have this attitude we will not covet our neighbors, house or his wife or anything else that is our neighbors. Instead we will be willing to make sacrifices to help him with his house and to protect his marriage.

And if we love God most of all, that will make a great difference in our priorities. If our greatest desire is for God – which means worshipping God and enjoying fellowship with God and wanting to please him more than anything else – that will put all other desires in their place. We can desire a good wage and a comfortable lifestyle, but our desire for delighting in God and pleasing God will mean that our desire for a good wage and a comfortable lifestyle will be incorporated into our desire for God so that we will delight in God for his generosity to us, and we will want to use the resources that he gives us in a way that is pleasing to him which will involve self-control and moderation and generosity and sacrifice.

So the Tenth Commandment requires that we think about our desires. Pleasing God means ordering our desires in such a way that they reflect God's priorities for our lives. Our greatest desire is to know, love and please God and all our other desires will be established on the basis of our highest priority.

Now if you give a little thought to your life, you will realize that you do not even come close to ordering your desires according to the will of God. All you need to do is think about what it means to love God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself and you will realize that your desires are in the wrong order. Our natural inclination is to love ourselves with all our hearts and our greatest desire is to please ourselves and pleasing God and loving our neighbor are way down the list. This command is one of the most probing when it comes to exposing our sins.

This what Paul found out when the Lord opened his eyes to his sinfulness. When Paul was describing how the law of God convicted him of sin, the specific law that he mentions is the Tenth Commandment. Romans 7:7, "Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet, if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." Paul came to see something of the depth of his sinfulness when God opened his eyes to the reach of the Tenth Commandment – into the very depths of his being – regulating the very desires of his heart. And that led to the cry, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

The Tenth Commandment searches our hearts. It exposes our disordered desires. It teaches us that God is not only concerned with what we say and do, but also with what we want, what we love, what we desire. And that is extremely convicting. If we see what the Tenth Commandment requires of us, we are given a very disturbing insight into what great sinners we are.

But God's reason for this is not that we despair but that we turn to him for mercy. The Lord exposes our sins so that we might turn to Jesus for forgiveness and renewal. After Paul acknowledges his wretchedness and asks the question, "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" he continues, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord." And in the next chapter, chapter 8 of Romans he writes in verse 1, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." And in verses 3&4 he writes that God "By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, In order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

Even as the Tenth Commandment exposes something of the depth of our sinfulness, the good news is that Jesus Christ and his salvation is more than adequate to deliver us from even the sins of our desires. In Christ all our covetousness is forgiven and through his Spirit the work begins to re-order our desires. A great change occurs the moment we are born again and trust in Jesus so that our love for God and neighbor grows and we begin to learn to put our sinful desires to death. There is a beginning of this in this life. And we can make progress by the grace of God. Through the means of grace. Through the on-going work of the Spirit and through our own efforts in the Lord we can begin to experience the blessedness of having our desires ordered more closely according to God's priorities and the closer we come to loving God first, loving our neighbor as ourselves the more we will please God and experience the blessedness of having our desires ordered by the will of God.