

The 10th Command: Covet Christ! Exodus 20:17

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My wife Jennifer and I had an occasion to not stay, but be around, the entrance to an exclusive hotel. Maybe you've done the same. As we were standing there, a black Cadillac SUV pulled up. I looked through the front glass, and for whatever reason, just the shape of his head was enough for me to see who it was. I whispered to Jennifer, "I think it's Warren Buffet." If you don't know who Warren Buffet is, he's generally the second or third richest man in the world worth somewhere around 60 billion dollars. I thought it was him. Sure enough, Warren Buffet got out of the vehicle, along with a small entourage, and walked right past me. Being the resourceful pastor that I am, as he walked past I was able to slip into his pocket a Bethel Church tithing envelope... so will see if anything shows up. I'm kidding!

Warren Buffet is one of the richest men in the entire world. It's hard to wrap your mind around 60 billion dollars much less wish we had all that he has. But how do you feel when a sibling, a neighbor or a friend buys something or has something you really wish you had? What about when they have a win, a success, or an accomplishment that you really want for yourself? We all know that inward emotion. It's a combination of resentment, rivalry, and irritation. We can put a lot of words on that feeling but God puts one word on it and says, don't do this.

You will hear God's Word in Exodus 20:17, also known as the tenth commandment. As you turn there, we are nearly done with this teaching series on the Ten Commandments. I have very much enjoyed it and been challenged by it. I hope you have as well. This weekend is the tenth command and next weekend we will study the Great Command to wrap up the series.

"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." (Exodus 20:17)

Did you hear God's Word? "Covet" or the longer version, "covetousness," isn't a word we commonly use, although it is a common Bible word. The word in English carries a negative connotation, but the Hebrew word is actually neutral. We could translate it "desire." You shall not desire your neighbor's house, or wife, or donkey, which is a real struggle for many of us. *If I only I had his donkey!* To want a donkey isn't wrong; to want or plot to have your neighbor's donkey is another matter.

Desire. This is a command about heart-level desires. Clearly, God made human beings filled with desires. Before the Fall, all those desires were good. Desires for relationship. Fellowship with God and man. Worship. Food. Beauty. Pleasure. Sex. Communication and so forth. All of these were part of God's good creation and expressions of God's goodness to us. Desire, by itself, is good. As we have talked many times, human desires and our pleasure in fulfilling them are all God-intended signposts or breadcrumbs to lead us to one ultimate desire. This is why they are all so temporarily satisfying. They are thrilling, but not enduring. God never intended the fulfillment of an earthly desire to be ultimately satisfying. If he would have, how quickly we would make a god out of food or sex and mistake them for God himself.

But after Adam and Eve sinned, our hearts were shattered, and our worship too. Rather than the lesser desires leading us to God, we now make gods out of these lesser things and think, *if only I possessed this or that, then I would be truly satisfied and happy*. So what do we do when we see someone else with the thing we think would make us happy? We desire it and perhaps even desire them NOT to have it. That's coveting. It's an insatiable craving for what I don't have and desiring to take it from others who do have it. If you watched the suicide tape of the Santa Barbara mass murderer this week, you heard coveting at its psychopathic extreme.

This is sin. Sin is insane. Sin robs us of joy. Sin pushes us in directions that ruin us and the life obsessed with identity in things or accomplishment will hate anyone who has it.

What is Coveting?

- "Covetousness is desiring something so much that you lose your contentment in God." (John Piper, *Future Grace*, p. 221.)
- "A consuming desire to possess in a wrong way something belonging to another." (John Mackay as quoted in Ryken, *Written in Stone*, p. 202)
- "It's not simply wanting something we don't have; it's wanting something that someone else has." (Philip Graham Ryken, *Written in Stone*, p. 202.)

Again, ancient confessions help here. Here's the *Westminster Larger Catechism* on this:

"Question 147: What are the duties required in the tenth commandment?"

Answer: The duties required in the tenth commandment are, such a full contentment with our own condition, and such a charitable frame of the whole soul toward our neighbor, as that all our inward motions and affections touching him, tend unto, and further all that good which is his.

Question 148: What are the sins forbidden in the tenth commandment?

Answer: The sins forbidden in the tenth commandment are: discontentment with our own estate; envying and grieving at the good of our neighbor, together with all inordinate motions and affections to anything that is his."

The catechism highlights both the disease and the cure. The disease is discontentment with what I have and what God has given me. This leads me to resent others who have it and to look at them with the green eye of envy. Coveting is about comparing. Coveting is about rivalry. This is why it is so easily found in relationships we have with people we view as our equals, like siblings. Cain's sacrifice was not accepted, but Abel's was. Cain murdered Abel. Jacob gave Joseph the coat of many colors. His brothers nearly murdered him, but instead, sold him as a slave. What was behind the outward actions? Comparison. Rivalry. Selfishness. We don't covet Warren Buffet's \$60 billion but our brother's nicer house or our sister's nicer body? *Who do they think they are? Who does she think she is? Why do they have it and I don't?* How easy to covet a sibling's or friend's house or spouse or ox or donkey (symbols of financial success in the ancient world). Why?

Is it really about that fourth bedroom or the two-sizes-smaller dress she flaunts? What is really going on with coveting? Who has the problem?

"And he said, 'What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,

coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:20-23)

The tenth command is the command for anyone who hasn't been listening. How easy it is to think superficially through the other nine commands. *I don't bow to idols. I'm a good son or daughter. I never murdered anyone. I never robbed a bank. I must be a good person in the eyes of God.* Then you get to the tenth command and it's an internal command. There's no outward legalistic line with which I can measure myself. It's heart-level. Am I content with God's provision in my life? Do I think I deserve better or more than God has given me? Do I question God's goodness in giving it to others? Do I quietly plot how I can attain it and think if I do, then I will be happy? We may get through commands one through nine but then the tenth command crushes us.

“Thou shalt not covet is the internal commandment which shows the man who thinks himself to be moral that he really needs a Savior. The average such 'moral' man, who has lived comparing himself to other men and comparing himself to a rather easy list of rules, can feel, like Paul, that he is getting along all right. But suddenly, when is confronted with the inward command not to covet, he is brought to his knees.” (Francis Schaeffer as quoted by Ryken, *Written in Stone*, p. 207.)

Coveting and Idolatry

“For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.” (Ephesians 5:5)

Paul adds a commentary to only one thing on that list—covetous—and says, *“That is, an idolater.”* These two always go together. Remember an idol is anything we love or long for more than God. These can be good things that we look to as ultimate things; things that if only we had them, would make us happy.

One great way to know the idols of our hearts is to look to our envies. Our envies will lead us to our idols. When do you feel covetous or envious of others?

- We may envy people's physical looks or shape because of an idol of appearance or acceptance.
- We may envy people's money because of our idol of success or materialism.
- We may envy people's marriages or families because of an idol of perfection or reputation.
- We may envy people's status symbols because of our idol of status and perceived happiness derived from them.

Here's another help. Look at the things we seek to control. Control is a form of coveting. I seek to manage my life toward my idols. As I was preparing to write this sermon I called my bank because I had not received my monthly statement. They informed me that it's available online; if I wanted a paper statement it would now cost me \$4 a month. I expressed my displeasure at this fee and asked them to pass my opinion up the chain of command. I'm sure that really made a big difference. Four dollars for paper and an envelope. I was miffed. Why? The big bank sticking it to the little guy? Not really. I think it had more to do with the four dollars. Our control issues relate to what we covet and what we covet are the real idols of our hearts.

This is why money is so precarious for us. Not the money itself or paper with green ink on it but all that money can provide. It's the portal to nearly all the idols of the heart. If I have enough money, I can have the perfect home or luxury car. I can buy status and perceived success. Money can buy me every idol I covet. At least we think so. Then those with Buffet billions die or take their own lives and we realize money and possessions can't and won't satisfy.

Jesus warned us of this, *"And he said to them, 'Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.'"* (Luke 12:15) This verse is a helpful one when we are overawed by someone's wealth or influence. The real qualities of human life, the ones that matter, don't have anything to do with abundance. Don't be too impressed.

"And he told them a parable, saying, 'The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.'" (Luke 12:16-21)

What was this man's idol? What did he covet? Security. Ease. A life oriented around himself and his little kingdom. How was he foolish? His love for the things of this world was without regard or reference to eternity or God. *"One's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."* (Luke 12:15) Money or things money provides are not the measure of the man or the means to his true happiness.

If we really thought that, why would we resent or covet what other people have? Do we resent other peoples' cancer? Other people's unemployment? Other peoples' disasters? No. But we do resent those who are happy or satisfied with their lives. If we could just see what matters in life and that happiness is not produced by things, then not only would we not resent people for having them, we would be free to actually rejoice with them in their successes.

Coveting or Contentment?



Each command tells us about the character of God and has a positive command with it. How about the tenth? What does *no coveting* tell us about God? ***It tells us that God alone satisfies the human heart.*** God alone provides what we need. God is sovereign over our lives and our circumstances. God is good in what he provides for us and what he provides for others. If I have something, it is because of the goodness of God. If I don't have something, God also deems that good. The tenth command is about the sufficiency of God

as soul-satisfier and the final judge of what is good for me. All of that is another way of saying that the tenth command is a command to covet God and God alone.

You might say, *Wait, what? Are you saying it's wrong to strive to improve my lot, wrong to improve my car, wrong to improve my savings account, wrong to improve my health?* No. God is for human flourishing. 1 Timothy 4:4 says, *"For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving."*

- The tenth command is about freeing us from the materialistic mindset
- Freeing us from identity in things
- Freeing us from thinking he who dies with the most toys wins
- Freeing us from the lustful accumulation of this world
- Freeing us from the kind of misdirected, obsessive, and pathological life pictured tragically in Gollum and the ring of power in *The Lord of the Rings*...his precious

If there is one command that is needed in American materialism it is the command to covet God. We must never think that having anything but him will satisfy the longings of our hearts. What can satisfy? What can provide my soul with peace and contentment? God alone through his Son Jesus. When I realize that God gave me his own Son as a sacrifice for my sin and redemption for my guilt, now there is no circumstance that I cannot be content in because in every circumstance I have Jesus. This is Paul's argument in Philippians:

"Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me."
(Philippians 4:11-13)

People quote verse 13 and apply it to anything and everything. No. This has to do with contentment. Paul was familiar with seasons of abundance and seasons of want; times of plenty and times of hunger. Yet there is a secret he had learned. Are you in a time of want? A time of hurt? A time of trial? Have you lost something or someone very dear to you? You long for peace and contentment. As Christians, there is a secret. Do you know it?

If we are looking to our circumstances for contentment, we will never find it. Our circumstances are always changing, and in a broken world, ultimately disappointing. There are some circumstances that can never be changed. I'll never have contentment in those IF I derive peace from circumstances. But Paul's contentment wasn't in his circumstances.

Contentment does not come from changing my circumstances to meet my desires, but rather changing my desires to meet my circumstances.

How can the Christian do this?

My circumstances are controlled by a sovereign God who loves me.

Do I believe God is in control or not? If he is, then the things I deem unchangeable and undesirable are here for reasons I may not understand but can trust God in. How do I know he loves me? He gave me Jesus.

In every circumstance, whether desirable or not, Christ is the source of my strength and satisfaction.

That is Philippians 4:13. But what does it mean? It goes back to Philippians 1:21, "*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*" Paul treasured having Christ so much that even death was gain to him because in death he gained Christ. This is so hard for us because this world and this life have such a hold on us. But Christ assures us of eternal life and that we should live to be rich there.

I can battle coveting what I don't have or what others do have by treasuring above all else what I have in Christ.

Do you think about your final days on earth or even your deathbed? There will be no more houses to buy. Hobbies to live for. Money to make. Degrees to earn. Possessions to accumulate. All there is ahead is eternity. What do we step into eternity with? Not a house. Not a spouse. Not an ox. Not a donkey. That's true for Warren Buffet and the homeless man on the street. Death reveals the true value of all these things we covet so dearly. What is their value? Nothing really. So how can the Christian die happy? If in my life I coveted Christ, then I can step into eternity with anticipation because in death I finally get what I have longed for—personal presence with Jesus and eternal life in paradise with God.

Dear friends, the things in this world are not evil in themselves but we make them evil when we covet them and mistakenly place our hope for happiness in them. It is better to covet God. Better to covet Christ. Better to covet the godliness of godly saints. Better to covet commendation from Christ as a good and faithful servant. This is how we fulfill the tenth command: enjoy the freedom it provides to live in this world without loving it and to be rich in eternity as our spiritual longings are fulfilled in Christ.

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