

YOU SHALL NOT COVET

Exod 20:17

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E. Stanley Jones, in his book *Growing Spiritually*, tells the story of a fictional person who lived out a fantasy life. All this man had to do was think of it and (poof!) it happened. So, in a moment of time, he sticks his hands in his pockets, leans back, and imagines a mansion and (poof!) he has a fifteen-bedroom mansion, three stories high, with servants instantly available to wait upon his every need. Why, a place like that needs several fine cars. So he again closes his eyes and imagines a driveway full of the finest wheels money can buy. And (poof!) there are several of the best vehicles instantly parked in his driveway. After being driven about for a while by the chauffeur, he returns home and wishes for a sumptuous meal. And (poof!) there is a fabulous feast of food in front of him—which he eats alone. And yet . . . there is something more he needs . . . he needs to find happiness. Finally, he grows so terribly bored and unchallenged that he says to one of the attendants, “I want to get out of this. I want to create some new things again. I’d rather be in hell than be here.” To which one of the servants replies quietly, “Where do you think you are?”

You and I live in a world that longs for things. We live in a world that proclaims, “Possessions bring pleasure. If you have this or that, you will be happy. After all, the one who dies with the most toys wins!” *Stuff cannot make you happy*. If you are unhappy, more stuff, more things will not make you happy.

Not too long ago, I was talking with a relative of mine. This relative has not had it easy in his efforts to establish himself and provide for his family. He spoke of his dreams and desires for himself and his family. He told me all the things that he wanted. Nothing that he wanted was bad—it was all very good—it just seemed to me that he wanted too much and he wanted the too much too soon. Finally, he asked for my advice. I replied, “The problem is with your want-er. Fix that, and you will be content with what you have.”

Our want-er—it must be brought under control; but this is easier said than done. *You and I live in a society that is characterized by unbridled consumerism and undisciplined individualism.* Unbridled consumerism believes that the main activity of human life is to accumulate, to use, and to enjoy more and more of the available resources of the earth. Undisciplined individualism teaches us that we are entitled to whatever we may want no matter who else may be hurt. Taken together, these two forces too often brainwash us into thinking that we are entitled to the things we want and therefore we have the right to satisfy our wants without regard for the consequences. To not want is almost un-American.

We come, today, to the last of the Ten Commandments: “You shall not covet.” “You shall not let your want-er get out of control.” We begin our study of this commandment with verse 1 of Exodus chapter 20:

Then God spoke all of these words saying: “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. **You shall have no other gods in My presence**” (20:1-3).

“**You shall not make for yourself an idol**, whether in the form of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is on the earth below, or that is in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down in worship to them nor shall you serve them, because I, Yahweh your God, am El Qanna [a jealous God], punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but lavishing loyal-love to a thousand [generations] of those who love Me and obey My commandments” (20:4-6).

“**You shall not make wrongful use of the name of Yahweh your God**, for Yahweh will not let you go unpunished if you make wrongful use of His name” (20:7).

“**Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy.** Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your livestock, or the alien resident who is within your settlements. For in six days Yahweh made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore Yahweh blessed the Sabbath Day and made it holy” (20:8-11).

“**Honor your father and your mother**, so that your days may be long in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you” (20:12).

“**You shall not kill**” (20:13).

“**You shall not commit adultery**” (20:14).

“**You shall not steal**” (20:15).

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (20:16).

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house: **you shall not covet** your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor” (20:17).

“Covet”—the Hebrew word is כָּמַד (khamad)—means “to desire something inordinately or desire something belonging to someone else so strongly that one is moved to reach out and take it.”¹ Barbara Brown Taylor renders the tenth commandment as: “Don’t fondle other people’s things in your mind as if they were your own.” “Covet” covers the entire human sequence from seeing to desiring to taking. Although there is some dispute as to whether or not coveting must always include the act of taking possession, there is no doubt that such possession is the goal of coveting. Whether in the ancient world or in the modern world, no clear distinction can or should be made between the obsessive desire for a thing and the obtaining of the thing itself.

Adam and Eve, the original human beings who became the original sinners, lived in the paradise of the Garden of Eden. Yet, they were fooled into wanting more. Gen 3:6 reads:

So when the woman *saw* that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be *desired* [כָּמַד – coveted] to make one wise, she *took* of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

“Saw,” “desired,” “took”—the “original” sin, and the rest is history. The simple act of observing the tree turns to coveting after the serpent’s revelation of the special nature of the tree. And, in turn, the coveting leads to taking possession. Saw, desired, took—and the world that God had created became the world that we have corrupted.

In English, there is a phrase that captures something of the meaning of covet in the tenth commandment: “have one’s eye on something.” If I say, “I’ve had my eye on a Harley motorcycle for some time,” I may mean that I have just obtained a Harley motorcycle. Don’t worry. I bought it; I did not steal it.

The tenth commandment serves as a summary commandment, the violation of which is a first step that can lead to the violation of any one or all the rest of the

¹Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy, Interpretation* (John Knox Press, 1990), 95.

commandments. My interpretative paraphrase of this last commandment is: “*Now concerning the nine previous commandments, not only should you not break them, do not even think about breaking them!*” The secret to *doing* what is right is first *desiring* what is right. This is precisely the point Jesus is making in the Sermon on the Mount. When, in Matthew chapter 5, Jesus says, “But I say unto you,” He is not radically reinterpreting the commandments; He is drawing out their meaning in terms of the coveting root of all disobedience.

Scripture’s insights into the nature of coveting are deeper than the simple notion that we tend to want too much stuff; rather, such insights help us to see more clearly just *why* we do want too much, and to see more clearly *how* the excesses of our desires actually happen. God simply does not recognize our modern-day distinctions between the internal and the external, between the subjective and the objective, between the personal and the communal. It is all of one piece to Him. God is concerned with not only what we do, but also with what we think, and how that thinking drives our actions which in turn affects our neighbor. The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart.

The tenth commandment and the first commandment are bookends of this great body of law. Some have suggested that the tenth commandment is distinctly different from the previous nine because it adds intention to the list of actions that are proscribed. I beg to differ. The tenth commandment harkens back to the first commandment’s demand that only Yahweh be worshiped. When we pledge our allegiance to the God who has saved us, we not only reject all other would-be gods, we pledge to fix our thoughts and actions on the will of that God to the exclusion of all other thoughts and actions. The tenth commandment states explicitly what the first commandment said implicitly: both thoughts and actions must be directed by and to Yahweh, the savior and redeemer.

There is a common statement that, if taken seriously, makes no sense. With regard to Jesus’ warnings in the Sermon on the Mount, there are those who would argue that even *thinking* about killing or adultery or stealing or lying constitutes the act itself. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt 5:27-28, NIV). Now here is the statement I am talking about: “Well, since I have already thought about it I am guilty of doing it, so I might as well go ahead and do it.” Hopefully, when a

person says this they are only joking. *First, thinking the thought is not the same thing as doing the deed.* Adultery of the heart, as sinful as it is, is not adultery of the flesh. If you had to choose, which one would you prefer to forgive your spouse for? The consequences of the act exceed those of the thought. *Second, such a statement does not take seriously the warning against coveting.* Since thinking precedes doing, then stop thinking the thought! Be careful what you think and correct any coveting before it leads to doing. Another way of putting this is, *watch where you look.* Watch where you look, because that is the direction in which you are headed.

There is a cartoon that shows an aerial view of four pastures at the point where they intersect. There is a cow in each pasture, and each cow is reaching through the fence to eat the grass in the next pasture. We smile, not because of what the cartoon says about cows, but because of what it says about us. The grass on the other side of the fence seems greener to us too.

Some religions seem to have as their goal the extinguishing of desire, the making of people who have so detached themselves that they no longer burn with need. Christianity is not like that. Our problem as humans is not that we are full of desire, aflame with unfulfillment. Our problem is that we long for that which is unfulfilling. We attempt to be content with that which can never satisfy. As C. S. Lewis observed, we are far too easily pleased.

Augustine in his *Confessions* wrote, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” The real disaster of coveting, as the Ten Commandments show us, is that it leads to serving other gods. Coveting blinds our eyes so that we lose sight of the God who loves us. And no matter how much stuff fills our eyes, we will find that our lives are empty, because “You have make us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

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