

THE TENTH COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20:17

By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

The title of the sermon is “The Tenth Commandment.”

Today we are going to look at what might be the mother of all sins.

If you can conquer this sin in your life,

then you can conquer all the sin in your life.

then you can conquer eliminate most of the causes of your unhappiness.

then you can defeat most of the causes of relational conflict in your life.

II. TEXT

Turn with me to **Exodus 20:17 (CSB)**. “Do not covet your neighbor’s house. Do not covet your neighbor’s wife, his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

The same command is found **Deuteronomy 5:21**, but it is worded slightly differently. “Do not covet your neighbor’s wife or desire your neighbor’s house, his field, his male or female slave, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

The sin that we’re looking at today is covetousness.

When you put these two verses together there are **eight things** that we are not to covet: Your neighbor’s house, his male servant, his female servant, his wife, his ox, his donkey, his field, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

III. WHAT IS COVETOUSNESS?

The Hebrew word simply means *desire*.

Morally neutral. There is a good kind of covetousness, and a bad kind.

What is the sin of covetousness?

Covetousness is wrong desire. It is desire gone haywire.

To covet is to desire

- 1) the wrong things (things that God doesn't want you to have);
- 2) the right things for the wrong reason;
- 3) or the right things too strongly. So let's examine each of these in more detail.

First, to covet is to desire the wrong things (things that God doesn't want you to have).

This would involve the desire for sinful pleasures like drugs and alcohol and illicit sex, and desiring anything that belongs to your neighbor – not only his possessions, but his status, his talents, his looks, his intelligence, his relationships, etc.

The moment you desire something that is not lawfully yours, or is against God's will, or something sinful, you have already sinned.

Second, to covet is to desire the right things for the wrong reason.

It is not wrong to desire a higher income; but it is wrong to desire a higher income if your motive is selfishness.

It is not wrong to want a new car, but if you want a new car because you want to impress people, then that is sin.

It is not wrong to desire marriage, but if you desire marriage because you think it will help you overcome your depression, then that is sin.

Third, to covet is to desire the right things too strongly.

It is not wrong to desire money, but it is wrong to love money.

It is not wrong to desire a higher income, but if you desire it so much that you are willing to neglect your family and your spiritual life and your health, then that is a sin.

It is not wrong to desire love, but you are willing to violate your conscience to get people to accept you, or to get someone to love you, then that is a sin.

Mark Driscoll gave a long and short definition of covetousness.

Long: “Covetousness is ungodly, discontented desire; passion, envy, craving, greed, jealousy, obsession, longing, or lust for someone or something that is not supposed to be yours.”

Short: “Covetousness is when you don’t want what God wants for you. There’s conflict between what God wants and what you want for you.”

Augustine defines covetousness as “to desire more than enough; to aim at a great estate.”

Coveting is the desire to be rich. It is not wrong to be rich; it is wrong to want to be rich, or to be jealous of those who are rich.

1 Timothy 6:9-10 says, “9 But those who want to be rich fall into temptation, a trap, and many foolish and harmful desires, which plunge people into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and by craving it, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”

How much money is it okay to desire?

One commentary said that it is morally permissible to desire enough money to keep us from the temptation of poverty, which is the temptation to steal.

Proverbs 30:7-9 says, “7 Two things I ask of you; don’t deny them to me before I die: 8 Keep falsehood and deceitful words far from me. Give me neither poverty nor wealth; feed me with the food I need. 9 Otherwise, I might have too much and deny you, saying, “Who is the Lord?” or I might have nothing and steal, profaning the name of my God.”

So it is okay to desire enough money so that you are not tempted to steal, and this includes stealing from God by not tithing.

As well, it is morally permissible to desire enough money to honor God with generosity – by sharing with those in need. In other words, it is okay to desire more than enough, so that you can use your extra to bless others.

Ephesians 4:28 says, “Let the thief no longer steal. Instead, he is to do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need.”¹

Philip Ryken said, “We often want the wrong thing, in the wrong way, at the wrong time, and for the wrong reason, and this is what the tenth commandment rules out.”

The New Testament uses two different words for covetousness.

Pleonexia means “an insatiable desire of getting the world.”

And then *philargyria* means “an inordinate love of the world.”²

¹ The Biblical Illustrator.

² The Biblical Illustrator.

1 John 2:15 says, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”

The Bible says we are not to love the world. We are to love God, and people, and ourselves. But we are not to love the world.

Let’s look at the old Protestant catechism from the sixteenth century.

Westminster Shorter Catechism: Quest. 80. What is required in the tenth commandment? Ans. 80. The tenth commandment requireth full contentment with our own condition, with a right and charitable frame of spirit toward our neighbour, and all this is his.

Quest. 81. What is forbidden in the tenth commandment? Ans. 81. The tenth commandment forbiddeth all discontentment with our own estate, envying or grieving at the good of our neighbour, and all inordinate motions and affections to any thing that is his.

So really the tenth commandment, do not covet, is the commandment to be content, and to avoid discontentment.

It is to be satisfied and happy with your current situation, where God currently has you.

Most people struggle with discontentment.

Philip Ryken said, “Sometimes we are discontented with our physical attributes. On other occasions we are discontented with our place of service in the church. Then there are all the times when we are discontented with our situation in life. Singles are discontented with their singleness. Then we get married, and we are discontented with that too.”

To covet is to always be longing for something else, something that we don’t have, rather than being happy in Jesus right now.

Charles Swindoll quotes this poem by an unknown author:

It was Spring, but it was Summer I wanted:
The warm days and the great outdoors.

It was Summer, but it was Fall I wanted:
The colorful leaves and the cool, dry air.

It was Fall, but it was Winter I wanted:
The beautiful snow and the joy of the holiday season.

It was Winter, but it was Spring I wanted:
The warmth and the blossoming of nature.

I was a child, and it was adulthood I wanted:
The freedom and the respect.

I was 20, but it was 30 I wanted:
To be mature and sophisticated.

I was middle-aged, but it was 20 I wanted:
The youth and the free spirit.

I was retired, but it was middle-aged I wanted:
The presence of mind without limitations.

My life was over,
And I never got what I wanted.

That's a good description of covetousness. Always wanting what you don't have, and never being happy and satisfied with what you do have.

I. EXAMPLES OF COVETOUSNESS IN SCRIPTURE

The Bible is filled with examples of covetousness.

- Eve coveted the forbidden fruit, as well as the wisdom of God, knowing both good and evil. This led to the Fall.
- Achan, in the battle of Jericho. All of the gold, silver, bronze, and iron were to be set aside for God's treasury, while everything was to be destroyed. But Achan coveted some of the treasures of the city, and stole them for himself; His coveting led to the defeat of the army of Israel in the next battle at Ai, and to his own stoning and death at the command of God.
- Saul coveted David's fame. The people praised David as a greater warrior than Saul. This led to Saul's plots and attempts to murder David.
- David coveted Bathsheba, the wife of another man. David saw Bathsheba bathing on her rooftop, and he coveted her. This led to his adultery with her, as well as the murder of her husband.
- Absalom, David's son, coveted his father's throne. He then led a revolt, a civil war against his father, which led to his own death.
- The wicked king Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard, which was next to his palace; when Naboth refused to sell it, Ahab went into a depression and would not eat. His wife then bribed some men to testify falsely that Naboth had committed blasphemy. Naboth was put to death, and Ahab got his vineyard. This led to God's judgment on both Ahab and Jezebel.
- Naaman was the commander of the army of Aram, and he had leprosy. So someone sent him to Elisha, and Elisha healed him. So Naaman wanted to give Elisha a monetary gift, but Elisha refused it. After Naaman left, Elisha's servant Gehazi coveted Naaman's wealth; he ran after Naaman and lied and said, "My master just changed his mind and wants 75 pounds of silver and two sets of clothing." So Naaman insisted that he take 150 pounds of silver. Then Gehazi lied about this to Elisha when he was asked where he went. And so Gehazi was struck with leprosy, his skin resembling snow.
- Judas was the treasurer for the disciples, and he coveted the money for himself, so he stole it. His covetousness for more money also led him to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.

- The Jewish religious leaders saw that Jesus was attracting such a huge following, and they coveted his popularity. This led them to kill Jesus. (Mark 15:10 says that their envy is what led them to kill Jesus.)

Coveting is as old as man, but it is no less deadly than it was in the Bible days.

II. HOW IS THE TENTH COMMANDMENT UNIQUE?

I want you to notice the uniqueness of this commandment.

First, this is the only commandment that deals with the heart.

All the other commandments focus on your actions; but the tenth commandment focuses on your heart.

“This is not about actions, but attitudes. It is not about deeds, but desires.”³

Second, this is the only commandment that is repeated.

Notice that Exodus 20:17 says “Do not covet” not once, but twice.

Some scholars suggest that this is to emphasize the importance of the tenth commandment.

Why is it so important?

Third, this commandment deals with the root of all other sins.

Before you break any of the other commandments, you first have to break the tenth commandment by coveting.

³ Alistair Begg

Before you dishonor your parents, you first have to covet something that dishonors them.

Before you commit murder, you first have to covet your neighbor's destruction.

Before you steal, you first have to covet your neighbor's property.

That's why this commandment is so important. It is the mother of all other sins.

Fourth, the tenth commandment is unique because it is the only one that cannot be policed by man.

There are no laws in our country that attempt to govern your attitude, or your desires, or your wishes.

The law of man can only restrict your actions.

But this commandment governs your heart, your desires, your wishes, your attitudes, your intentions.

And that makes it unique among all of the ancient law codes.

III. WHAT DOES THE TENTH COMMANDMENT TEACH US?

The tenth commandment teaches some very important lessons about our relationship with God that would do well to identify.

First, the tenth commandment teaches us that God sees our heart.

People cannot see what is in your heart, but God can.

And that's why He is able to command us, "Do not covet."

1 Samuel 16:7 says, “Humans do not see what the LORD sees, for humans see what is visible, but the LORD sees the heart.”

Second, the tenth commandment teaches us that God demands heart purity.

God is not merely interested in our actions, but our attitudes.

Not just our deeds, but our desires.

Matthew 5:8 says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

Matthew 5:28 says, “But I tell you, everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

1 Timothy 1:5 says, “Now the goal of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.”

Third, the tenth commandment teaches us that God demands absolute perfection.

When you look at the Ten Commandments as a whole, they teach us our threefold duty to our neighbor.

1) He is not to be injured in act.

2) He is not to be injured by word.

3) He is not to be wronged in thought.

In other words, God demands total perfection. Perfect holiness.

You might ask, “Isn’t God satisfied with my best effort?” No.

God demands moral and spiritual perfect, all the way down to your thoughts, attitudes, and desires.

Matthew 5:20 says, “For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.”

Matthew 5:48 says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Fourth, the tenth commandment teaches us the depths of our depravity.

If you thought you were a good person before, the tenth commandment should convince you that you are a filthy, rotten sinner.

Think of all the bad thoughts, and desires, and wishes, and fantasies that you’ve had.

Think of all the bad things that you’ve wanted; the things that you’ve wanted for the wrong reasons; the things of this world that you’ve wanted too much.

The Tenth Commandment shows us that we are desperately wicked and in need of a Savior.

It is meant to show us that we are not good; we cannot earn our way to heaven; we deserve only punishment. Our only hope is the cross of Jesus Christ.

Finally, the tenth commandment teaches us the cure for sin.

We cannot change our actions until we first change our hearts. All sin comes from the heart.

Matthew 15:19 says, “For from the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, slander.”

When you get saved, God gives you a new heart that desires to please God.

But if you want to grow in godliness, you must carefully guard your heart by weeding out sinful desires, attitudes, and thoughts.

Proverbs 4:23 says, “Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life.”

CONCLUSION

Next week we are going to take one last look at the Ten Commandments by spending one more week on covetousness.

We’re going to look at the dangers of covetousness; how to detect covetousness in your life; and the cure for covetousness.

But let me close by asking a few questions.

- 1) What are your goals?
- 2) What are your deepest desires?
- 3) What are your fantasies?
- 4) What are you chasing?
- 5) What are you pursuing?
- 6) What are you longing for?
- 7) What are you running after?
- 8) What are you working so hard to achieve or to get? And why?

Are you desiring the wrong things; things that God doesn’t want you to have?

Are you desiring the right things for the wrong reasons?

And are you desiring the right things, but too strongly?

The point of the tenth commandment is not to suppress all desire.

Desire is not a bad thing.

The point is that your desire should be for God and for the things of God.

For intimacy with God, for spiritual growth, for church growth, for evangelism, for victory over sin, for heavenly rewards, for greater fruitfulness and effectiveness for God, for a healthy marriage, for godly kids, for an end to injustice.

And as we will see next week, that is one of the cures for covetousness. Replace the wrong desires with the right desires.

One last verse will be helpful. **Proverbs 21:21 (NIV)** says, “Whoever pursues righteousness and love finds life, prosperity and honor.”

What are we supposed to desire and pursue and chase? Righteousness and love. Virtue.

And God promises a blessing:

Life, or safety from the consequences of sin;

prosperity, or an abundant, full and meaningful life.

And honor, or a good reputation, a good legacy, a good memory.

In other words, the best life is reserved for those who have a passionate, all-consuming desire for God and for the things of God.