

The Tenth Commandment: Coveting

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's." (Exo 20:17)

Not too long ago, I watched an experiment with monkeys. Two capuchin monkeys were placed in a smallish structure with transparent plastic separating them. The handler would approach, and separately get each one to perform a task, they simply had to hand a rock to the scientist. If they performed the task properly, they were each rewarded with a cucumber. So long as they got that, they were willing to perform the simple task 25 times in a row. Then the real test came. The one monkey performed a task, and the handlers gave it a grape instead. The other monkey saw what his neighbour got. It was now his turn. He performed the task, and instead of the grape, they gave him a cucumber again. The monkey looked at it, and literally threw it back at the handler.

It was amazing to watch these animals compare, and experience something that we would call envy. And I thought as I watched that, if that is the case with animals without the qualities of reason and self-awareness and morality, how much more is it the case in humans made in God's image.

Do not covet what belongs to your neighbour.

With the other commands, we tend to let ourselves off lightly. We say, I am no murderer, no thief, no adulterer, until we look closely, and then we see how we break the commands. However, on the tenth commandment, it seems to be the reverse. We ask ourselves, how can you not do this? How is it possible to obey this? Does anyone succeed in not coveting?

Part of the problem is that we live in a culture that does its best to make coveting seem normal. David Wells said that worldliness is that system that makes sin seem normal and righteousness seem strange. So we eat and drink and breathe in a life that makes coveting seems normal. And the more normal it seems, the less we see how we could possibly obey this.

Our first stop has to be to define what exactly is the biblically definition of coveting your neighbour's life. What is the meaning of coveting? We'll then consider how coveting occurs – the manifestation of coveting. We'll then consider the remedy- how to mortify covetousness.

I. The Marks of Coveting

Let's begin by eliminating some wrong ideas of what coveting is. There are a few things that coveting is not.

First, sinful coveting is not simply desiring. When we have desires, this does not equal coveting. Desire is normal to a human life. We have physical desires which are placed there by God. We have desires for companionship, for love, for pleasure. If you had no desires, it would be impossible to motivate you in any way. You are motivated to do some things and avoid others simply because you have desires.

Not only are desires natural to a human life, they are natural to a Christian's life. The Hebrew word here for covet is *chamad*, which is actually used positively in the Bible. In Psalm 19, the Word of God is 'more to be desired than gold'. In Psalm 68:16, the same word is used for what God Himself does. It says the Mount of Zion is the mount God desires to dwell in.

Desire by itself is neither sinful nor righteous. It is what you desire, and how you desire it that turns it sinful or godly.

Second, sinful coveting is not having ambition. Ambition is a longing to achieve, to improve.

Several godly characters display ambition in Scripture. We read of Caleb who said to Joshua, I want that mountain. Daniel 11 speaks of the people of God who will do great exploits. Paul spoke of his ambition, when he said *"but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phi 3:13-14)*. Our Lord Himself said, *"I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! 50 "But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished! (Luk 12:49-50)*

Like desire, ambition by itself is neither sinful nor righteous. It is what you are ambitious for, and why, that turns ambition into something sinful or godly.

So desire and ambition may come into sinful coveting, but they are not coveting by themselves.

John Stott said something quite insightful: "If that something we desire is in itself evil, or if it belongs to somebody else and we have no right to it, then the envy is sinful. But if the something desired is in itself good, a blessing from God, which He means to have all people enjoy, then to 'covet' it and envy those who have it is not at all unworthy."

What is coveting? Look at your text.

17 "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's." (Exo 20:17)

The first thing we see about coveting is that it is based in envy at what is rightfully my neighbour's. It is not merely that I admire what my neighbour has. It is not merely that I enjoy what my neighbour has for my neighbour sake. It is not merely that I see how beautiful or luxurious or comfortable or admirable something is that my neighbour has. You can do all that and be perfectly within God's Law. In fact, it is not wrong if you like what your neighbour has so much that you go and get one for yourself.

Covetousness is looking at my neighbour: his family, his goods, his life, comparing it with my own, and growing in envy and discontent. The focus goes from what my neighbour has, to what I have, and then to how I need to have what my neighbour has.

The man does not suffer from discontent, until a comparison is made.

It is at the root of the other five commandments – do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness. Why do people commit adultery? Because they covet another man's wife or husband. Why do people steal? Because they covet another man's goods or money. Why people bear false witness? Because they covet a man's good name, and wish to see his name decrease, and theirs increase. Why do people murder? Often, because of envy, because of the desire to destroy one who stands in the way of getting what I want.

It's when I look over my fence, at my neighbour's garden, that I grow in unhappiness over mine, especially if what he has is out of reach for me. Cain was unhappy once he saw how Abel's sacrifice was honoured by God. Saul was unhappy once he saw how David was praised. The Pharisees looked at how the common people heard Jesus gladly, and they were filled with envy, with anger.

Watch this form right before your eyes in the faces of children. She's happily licking her ice cream, enjoying it, and then mid-lick her eyes lock on her sister's ice cream. It's bigger. And suddenly, she no longer enjoys her ice cream. Her neighbour has more than she does, and she cannot rest until she has what she has.

So much trade is built upon creating discontent by causing one man to envy his neighbour.

Someone has called advertising agencies the merchants of discontent, because the only way they can make you covet the goods they are selling is by making you discontent with your life. And the only way to do that is to show you a neighbour who supposedly has a much better deal than you.

What you have is old, outdated, ineffective – that's why you have the dull, drab life you do. Look what this beautiful, successful person is using, or drinking. Here you were, shaving with a razor that has only two blades. Poor you! Look at this handsome man, his razor has four blades. Look at how handsome he is, how contented he is, look at that beautiful woman who hangs around him and strokes his cheeks while he shaves. That's not your life is it?

Or look at her as she confidently strides down the street, heads turning as she walks. She gets into the elevator with five handsome men who stare at her as she stands front and centre, smiling to herself. You know why she has this life, and you don't? Because she sprays herself with a perfume that you don't.

Are you still using that same old toothpaste? You mean yours doesn't have an added layer for breath-freshening, micro-granules to get in-between those hard-to-reach spaces, a layer to deal with tartar, and a tooth-whitening effect? That's why you don't have the perfect happy smiles of this perfectly happy couple.

Even though the people in ads are only actors, they represent an imaginary neighbour, whose life we must have to be really content. We laugh, but does it not work? Advertisers scratch an ancient itch – I have to have what the haves have. Even if they are imaginary haves, even if they are actors, I have to have what they have.

Ecclesiastes reports the reality of this: *I saw that all labor and all skillful work is due to a man's jealousy of his friend. (Ecc 4:4)*

Coveting is an insatiable thirst for what others have. Why do we say insatiable? Because no one ever obeyed his covetousness, obtained, and then felt complete. Solomon told us that: *He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income. This too is vanity. (Ecc 5:10)*

It's what we call the law of diminishing returns. As you indulge a sinful appetite, what grows is not the satisfaction, but the appetite. And the more you try to obey lusts borne out of evil envy, the less they please you. So you re-double your efforts, and go at it more intensely, only to receive even less. This is the what the hard-core drug addict experiences. It's what the sex-addict experiences. It's what the blinded materialist experiences.

Coveting is not only desiring what another has. Secondly, it is desiring what is forbidden to us. There is nothing wrong with desiring what my neighbour has, if God has promised it to all of us. If my neighbour has more godliness than me, I should desire to be like him. If my neighbour has a great joy in life, I should desire that. When your neighbour has something of which God has said you may have equal share, then your neighbour can become a source of encouragement to pursue it. The sin of coveting is to lust for what is forbidden.

What makes it forbidden? If it rightfully belongs to another and there is no way I can have it. It's his house, his car, his wife. It's her clothing. It's his idea, his business. To meditate on this is to meditate on stealing or adultery.

It's also forbidden if it is evil to have in the first place. To desire what is sinful, what offends God, what God has told us not to do, what God has said is sinful to have, or to enjoy, or to think on – to desire this is coveting. Not only desiring with envy something legitimate that my neighbour has, but

desiring something evil.

Make no mistake, we are deeply drawn to what is forbidden. It started in the Garden. *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 desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. (Gen 3:6)*

Watch what happens when people see a 'keep off the grass' sign. Watch what happens to a video on the Internet when the title says, 'This was banned'. We are drawn to what is off-limits. Children are drawn to movies that are age-restricted above their age. Singers don't sing about things that are lawful – that would be boring. They sing about the forbidden.

People are drawn into affairs, and into corrupt deals, and into evil, precisely because it is racy, forbidden. *"Stolen water is sweet, And bread eaten in secret is pleasant. (Pro 9:17)*

To desire what is evil, is coveting. To desire what does not belong to you and will never belong to you lawfully, to lust after it with envy is coveting.

So how does it happen?

II. The Manifestation of Coveting

Out of the Ten Commandments, the tenth one is really the most hidden. You can find outward evidence, proof that someone has stolen, murdered, taken God's name in vain, worshipped falsely, committed adultery and so on. But how do you know when someone has coveted? It's hidden. It takes place within.

The commandment lists three categories of things that an Israelite could covet: property, people and possessions. Your neighbour's house – property, your neighbour's wife, that's people, and the rest is property in ancient Israel. We might not covet our neighbour's donkey, but we might covet his BMW, or his iPad, or smartphone. We might covet his her spouse, we might covet his children. We might covet his job, his salary. We could covet her clothing, her jewellery, her appearance.

There really is no limit to the amount of things that belongs to someone else, that we lust for ourselves, with envy. There is no end to the sinful and forbidden things in our world that Satan may tempt us to desire, which is coveting.

But James tells us how the process takes place.

Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? 2 You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. 4 Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. (Jam 4:1-4)

Step one – I want. Verse 2 says, you lust and do not have. I see what others have, and instead of enjoying it for their sake, I become envious. Perhaps the thing I want is forbidden. However, what I have is a growing appetite, with no satisfaction.

Step 2 – I need. I have convinced myself that my coveting is a genuine need without which I cannot survive or function. Remember how Amnon, the son of David coveted his sister Tamar? He so convinced himself that he needed what he could not have. *Amnon was so distressed over his sister Tamar that he became sick; for she was a virgin. (2Sa 13:2)*

Step 3 – I demand. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. I am so convinced that this thing is a need that the person keeping it from me has become my enemy. I hate him. I am willing to fight and war. I will stop at nothing to get this.

But verse 2 tells us the result of covetousness – you do not have because you do not ask. Your life is not submitted to God, so God withholds satisfaction from you. Even when you do pray, you pray for the thing you are coveting. But unless you submit to God, he will not let you enjoy that thing. Ecclesiastes teaches that not only the things, but the power to enjoy them, are gifts from God. God not only gives the toys, He gives the batteries.

Remember the monkey trap? That simple device – a hollow object tied to a chain, with a sweet inside. The opening is just wide enough for a monkey to get his hand in. But once he grabs the sweet and clenches his fist, his fist is too big to withdraw. All he needs to do is open his hand and he will be free. But he won't – he will fight and struggle to get his hand out with the sweet. That's the picture of covetousness. I know God doesn't want me to have this, but I will fight and fight and destroy myself to get it. All you need to do is open the hand, release, surrender, submit, and you're free.

And verse 4 tells us what is at the heart of this: worldliness. Too earthly-minded. Loving what God hates, and hating what God loves.

In fact, in Colossians 3:5, Paul uses the strongest possible term for covetousness. He says 'covetousness is idolatry.' Why is coveting idolatry? Because in coveting, I am abandoning the first of the Ten Commandments. There is a real symmetry between first and tenth. You remember we saw that the first commandment is to have God as your ultimate dependence and ultimate delight. You look no further than Him. He is where your joys and your hopes and your loves terminate. Well, what do you do when you covet? When you covet something which is forbidden, you are saying, there is something better than God. There is a life better than the one He gives. There is a master better than God. I do not trust God's provision. I do not trust God to give me what I need. I do not accept what He permits and what He forbids. I believe that this thing I am pursuing is better, bigger, stronger, more useful, more delightful, more satisfying than God.

Someone said, "We covet most what we value most. What we covet most we will sacrifice to obtain." - Bob Deffinbaugh.

So that leads us to the third thing which is the

III. The Mortification of Covetousness

5 Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Heb 13:5)

The remedy for coveting is contentment. If you want to put off coveting, you have to put on contentment. And the writer of Hebrews tells you the secret of contentment. He tells you what you have that you will never lose. Who and what is that?

If you have God as your Lord, and as your companion, and if He has come to dwell in you, you have the weightiest treasure on earth, the most enduring possession of all. He will not age and die, He will not rust and decay. He will not be stolen. He will not betray you. He will not depreciate in value.

Contentment is not complacency. It is not becoming passive and losing all ambition. Contentment is not the death of lawful desires for more, for more growth, for more of God, for more of Christlikeness. Contentment is not a stoic acceptance of every negative and evil event in our lives. It is normal and well to want to turn pain into pleasure and loss into gain and discomfort into comfort. Contentment is a grateful surrender to God's portion for me at this time. What God has supplied I give thanks for. I do not need my neighbour's life to be happy in God. I do not need what God has forbidden from me to be happy.

Since I have God Himself, I have more than enough. Teresa of Avila wrote, "He who has God, finds he lacks nothing, God alone suffices."

The root of covetousness is the "I'll be happy when I finally get the..." The root of contentment is "I already have the most precious thing I could have. All else is just extra blessing."

You may have heard of Corrie ten Boom. She was a Dutch Christian who, along with her family, hid many Jews from the Germans. They actually built a secret chamber in their house, so that when the Nazis did raids or inspections, the Jewish people housed there would hide in the chamber and go undiscovered. In fact, of all the people they hid, all but one survived the Holocaust. But in 1944, a Dutch informer revealed her hiding place to the Nazis, and she and her family were arrested and taken to prison; she and her sister Betsie ended up in Ravensbrück concentration camp. There she faced all the horrors of the concentration camps, and there her sister Betsie died. Out of that depth of suffering, Corrie ten Boom said this: "You will never know Christ is all you need, until Christ is all you have."

Be content with what you have, for He will never leave you nor forsake you.

My favourite hymn has these words: "Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise, Thou mine inheritance, now and always. Thou and Thou only, first in my heart, High King of Heaven, my treasure thou art." Is He your treasure? For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also?

Here is the remedy for covetousness: when you can say, God Himself is more than enough for me. All else is just extra blessing.