

God's Law
The Tenth Commandment
Thou Shalt Not Covet

Ex 20:1-17

- 1 And God spake all these words, saying,
- 2 I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.
- 3 Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
- 4 Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth:
- 5 Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;
- 6 And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.
- 7 Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.
- 8 Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.
- 9 Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work:
- 10 But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates:
- 11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.
- 12 Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.
- 13 Thou shalt not kill.
- 14 Thou shalt not commit adultery.
- 15 Thou shalt not steal.
- 16 Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.
- 17 Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his (*donkey*) ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's. KJV

Introduction:

We come this morning to discuss the final commandment in the ten given by God to Israel through Moses at Mt. Sinai, "Thou shalt not covet." I remember as a child struggling greatly with understanding this particular commandment. Some of you, maybe all of you, know that it is difficult being a child and having nothing while everyone around you seems to have plenty of everything. The presents that I would get for birthdays and Christmas paled by comparison with those that my classmates got. It seemed that every day I was being confronted with some nice thing that others had and I did not. My first new bicycle I bought myself by working at the lunchroom at the school I attended. I wore hand-me-down clothes until I got old enough to buy new ones for myself.

So, everywhere I went and everything I did exposed me to things that I desired but could not have. Therefore, I had questions about those desires. Was it wrong to want things? If I saw a new pair of shoes and wished that I had a pair like that, was it sin? If I looked in the Sears catalog and saw a bicycle and wanted one, was I somehow offending God and breaking His commandment? Some of my Sunday School teachers said ‘yes,’ and some said, ‘well, it depends.’ My Dad’s sermons seemed to affirm that I was sinning by wanting such things, but was I, really?

I asked myself questions like, “if I had no clothes or no food, would it be a sin to desire them?” “Is there a way to want a thing and it not be coveting?” I had to wait until I was much older before I began to make sense of the whole issue.

The scripture teaches us that this matter of covetousness was a huge thing in the life of the Apostle Paul. Listen to how he describes his own interaction with this commandment.

Rom 7:7-11

- 7 What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.
- 8 But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead.
- 9 For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died.
- 10 And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death.
- 11 For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me.
KJV

Rom 7:7-11

- 7 What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet."
- 8 But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead.
- 9 And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died;
- 10 and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me;
- 11 for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me. NAS

Let me see if I can give a brief breakdown of this passage, even though it would take a book to explain it properly. Paul had been making the case ever since chapter 4 that Justification, a right standing before God, Salvation, is through faith, not by the keeping of the Law of Moses. But the Jewish people were very much devoted to that idea and the Old Testament were the only scriptures that anyone, including the Gentiles, had at that time.

He was anticipating the objections and questions that would be thrown at him because of this

doctrine of Justification by Faith that he was teaching. One of those was, “Are you then saying that the Law is sin, evil, something that we should hate and despise?” This apparently was one of the conclusions that some had come to, as he had already referenced in chapter six.

Rom 6:1

1 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? KJV

Rom 6:1

1 Well then, shall we keep on sinning so that God can keep on showing us more and more kindness and forgiveness? TLB

Rom 6:1

1 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? NAS

Some were taking Paul’s teaching as an ‘either - or’ that one must choose between the Law and the message of Grace. If one accepted Grace and Justification by Faith, he had to completely reject all of the Law and maybe even the idea that one should not sin.

In Romans 7, he explained himself more completely. (1) - No, the Law of God is not sin, (2) - It is, rather, a very useful thing in our lives, (3) - I would not have known that I was a sinner, and, thus, in need of God’s Grace, except that I had learned this fact by the Law of God.

“The way that it worked was this, when I learned the commandment ‘thou shalt not covet,’ the sin that was already in me from birth got stirred up and I started coveting all kinds of thing. (You see, in a world without Law there is no real understanding of sin, it is as if it is dead.) There was a time when I did not really comprehend the Law but then the understanding of it came to me and I came to realize the spiritual death in me. I was overwhelmed by the reality of it. And even though the Law itself is a really wonderful thing, given to show us how to live, it became an instrument of death to me. Because I could not keep it, I was condemned by it, and when I tried to keep it I found myself dead inside, without the spiritual life necessary to obey it fully.”

If you read carefully the testimony of Paul’s salvation, you will notice a very interesting comment made by the Lord Jesus when He appeared to the man.

Acts 9:3-5

3 And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:

4 And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

5 And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. KJV

The word ‘pricks’ is actually ‘goads,’ the sharp sticks that were used to keep oxen moving when pulling a plow or a cart. I truly believe that these ‘goads’ were the realities in Paul’s soul that he was a sinner, a spiritually dead individual, unable to truly keep God’s Law, as evidenced by his failure to keep the 10th commandment.

So, there is nothing wrong with the Law of God, and the doctrines of Grace and of Justification

by Faith do not set aside God's Law or make it something that we should avoid as if it were a plague. The Law is vitally useful, so much so that in Galatians Paul called it, "Our schoolmaster, to bring us to Christ."

I am convinced that if you are outside of Christ and concerned about being right with Him there is some issue of the Law that is nagging at your conscience, testifying to you that there is something wrong, something broken, something dead inside of you that is preventing you from obeying God's commands on the one hand and placing you under His condemnation on the other.

So, what is coveting, really?

First of all, Jesus told us that it is one of those wicked elements of our depraved hearts which arise from within us and as they flow out of us, show us to be corrupt creatures.

Mark 7:20-23

- 20 And he said, That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man.
- 21 For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders,
- 22 Thefts, ***covetousness***, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness:
- 23 All these evil things come from within, and defile the man. KJV

So, it cannot be thought of as a casual or an indifferent matter. Covetousness is a sin on the same order as adultery, fornication, murder, and blasphemy. It is a hideously corrupt thing and should never be laughed off or disregarded as something unimportant. Remember, God placed it among the 10 most important moral principles of all time to take note of and avoid.

Here is what some of the great commentators have said on the matter.

Ex 20:12-17

(from Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: New Modern Edition, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 1991 by Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.)

VI. The tenth commandment strikes at the root: Thou shalt not covet, v. 17. ***The foregoing commands implicitly forbid all desire of doing that which will be an injury to our neighbour; this forbids all inordinate desire of having that which will be a gratification to ourselves. "O that such a man's house were mine! Such a man's wife mine! Such a man's estate mine!"***

This is certainly the language of discontent at our own lot, and envy at our neighbour's; and these are the sins principally forbidden here. St. Paul, when the grace of God caused the scales to fall from his eyes, perceived that this law, Thou shalt not covet, forbade all those irregular appetites and desires which are the first-born of the corrupt nature, the first risings of the sin that dwelleth in us, and the beginnings of all the sin that is committed by us: this is that lust which, he says, he had not known the evil of, if this commandment, when it came to his conscience in the power of it, had not shown it to him, Rom 7:7. God give us all to see our face in the glass of this law, and to lay our hearts under the government of it!

Ex 20:14-26

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The Tenth Commandment. *Covetousness is "the inordinate desire of unpossessed good"* (G. A. Chadwick, Exodus in Expositor's Bible). *"The most inward of all the commandments, forbidding not an external act, but a hidden mental state, a state, however, which is the root of nearly every sin against a neighbor"* (Cambridge Bible). It is basically the sin of Adam and Eve, to desire that which it is not God's will that we have.

Ex 20:1-17

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Verse 17. *As the sixth, seventh, and eighth commandments forbid us to injure our neighbor in deed, the ninth forbids us to injure him in word, and the tenth, in thought. No human eye can see the coveting heart; it is witnessed only by him who possesses it and by Him to whom all things are naked and open (Luke 12:15-21). But it is the root of all sins of word or deed against our neighbor* (James 1:14-15).

Obviously, they believed it to be a serious matter as well.

We find in the book of Hebrews that covetousness is the contrasting state of mind from contentment with what God has provided.

Heb 13:5

5 Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. KJV

And contentment is a resting in the faithful provision of God as well as His promises to take care of and provide for His people. This teaches us that covetousness is not always overt but can be very subtle and hidden within the soul. A discontent with God's provision rising from a distrust in His promise keeping can be the sin of covetousness rising up from within us.

Does that then mean that any desire that our circumstances be better than they are is covetousness? I have heard some people seem to suggest that. But I would have you remember that every person who ever came to Jesus to be healed was desiring a different situation than the one they were in. Not once did He ever level the charge of covetousness against them nor chide them for being discontent with the circumstance in life that God had given them.

Timothy was told to take a little wine so that he would not be sick so often and Paul labored exhaustively before God to have his 'thorn in the flesh' taken away. Even though God told Paul that the 'thorn' would stay, He did not rebuke him for covetousness.

There is obviously, then, something, some trigger, some line that is crossed, which turns a legitimate and honest desire into a covetous and improper lusting after some thing.

Paul used a word to describe that condition which was provoked and excited in himself through his negative interaction with the 10th commandment and that word is useful in helping us to understand how this particular *kind* of desire is different from the ordinary (and non-sinful) kind.

Rom 7:8 But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of *concupiscence*.

That word has all kinds of negative applications in the New Testament.

John 8:44

44 Ye are of your father the devil, and the *lusts* of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.

Rom 1:24-27

24 Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the *lusts* of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves:

25 Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

26 For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature:

27 And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet. KJV

Rom 6:12

12 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the *lusts* thereof.

It can mean either a corrupt craving for ungodly things or an unusual and wicked longing after things that might, in different circumstances, be either a neutral or maybe even a good thing.

Here are some possible issues that would qualify as covetousness:

Putting the desire for some thing that you could easily do without above the needs of others,

Neglecting or mistreating others in order to have some thing,

A willingness to sin against God in order to gain or acquire something,

Making the acquiring of some thing more important than God,

A strong desire which drives one to do that which is unwise, maybe even harmful to himself.

There is a myriad of applications which might be made but at the root covetousness is a painful longing, a burning desire, for something which one does not possess which drives him to the willingness to do something evil, selfish, unwise, or foolish in order to have it.

Let us look at some biblical examples of covetousness.

Was that not the sin of Eve when she took the fruit which God had commanded her not to eat?

Gen 3:6

- 6 And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. KJV

Did she not crave that which was forbidden with such an intensity that it made her willing to sin in order to have it?

Was it not the sin of Lot, when he chose the well watered plain of the Jordan even though taking that route would lead him too close to Sodom?

Gen 13:10-13

- 10 And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered every where, before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar.
- 11 Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan; and Lot journeyed east: and they separated themselves the one from the other.
- 12 Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent toward Sodom.
- 13 But the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the LORD exceedingly.

If you know the story you recognize that his selfish and covetous choice was only the beginning of a long and sad list of destructive and hurtful choices that Lot made.

Do you remember Potiphar's wife and her covetous, wicked proposition to Joseph which ultimately caused him to be cast into prison?

Remember Achan, who coveted the Babylonian garment and the wedge of gold at Jericho, having been forbidden by God to take anything from the city? His covetousness cost 36 good men their lives as well as Achan himself and his immediate family.

Or, how about Ahab, that wicked king of Israel, who coveted the vineyard of Naboth at Jezreel. He was willing to have it as his own after his wicked wife, Jezebel, had Naboth falsely accused and executed.

On and on we could go with stories such as David's covetousness concerning Uriah's wife, or Solomon's covetousness of the pleasures of this life, the rich young ruler's covetousness concerning all his possessions, or those who abandoned Paul, having loved this present world.

No, covetousness is not desiring a new pair of shoes when yours' have become worn. But it might be concerning buying 100 pair when you already have 50 you have not worn.

Covetousness is not desiring something to eat when you are hungry, but it might be if it drives you to overeat or to spend lavishly on a meal you really cannot afford.

It is not even desiring a new car when your old one is giving up the ghost, but it might be if you are buying a Ferrari when you only have a Ford budget.

We all battle the sin of covetousness

We must remember the seriousness of it. We should be content when God has provided all of our needs and never sin against Him in the pursuit of that which is unnecessary.

Even our desires for proper things must be carefully monitored lest they get out of hand.

At the same time, we should never hold back from seeking good things from God, even special interventions in our lives or the lives of others when those things are truly needed things. Following God's instructions concerning importunity in prayer is not covetousness.

Luke 18:1-6

- 1 And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint;
- 2 Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man:
- 3 And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary.
- 4 And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man;
- 5 Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.
- 6 And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith. KJV

Think carefully and prayerfully on the matter of Covetousness. Avoid, by God's Grace, the sin, but do not become confused either.

And if, like Paul, the sin and reality of covetousness or any other sin is leading you to a confession of yourself as sinner, accept the lesson so that the Law of God might be your Schoolmaster to bring you to Christ that you might be saved by Repenting of your sins and Trusting in Jesus Christ as your Only Hope of Salvation.