

Covetousness

Exodus 20:17

The tenth commandment can seem less important than the others, as if we began with *no other gods* and finish with *no donkeys*. But this commandment is the only one that directly addresses human desires—what drives every single one of us. It's the climax of the commandments, harkening back to and applying the first: "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth...covetousness, which is idolatry." (Col. 3:5). You are likely not tempted to pray to a false god, but covetousness is a mother of many sins, the root of all kinds of evil. This is the commandment that killed the apostle (Rom. 7:12).

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We don't use the word *covetousness* a lot, which makes us think this is a sin of fat cats and greedy monsters. But like the first commandment, it seems to be at play in all sin. Covetousness is an inordinate desire to have what belongs to others. Thomas Watson calls it "an insatiable desire to have the world." As the length of second commandment indicates our propensity to bow down to images of anything, and the fourth emphasizes giving rest to as many people as possible, so the tenth commandment lists our temptations to covet our neighbor's anything: house (net worth, possessions), wife (relationships, family), male servant, female servant (lifestyle, status), ox, donkey (occupation, productivity), "and anything that is your neighbors" (everything else). God names seven things, the number of completion. We find this sin in awful company: "For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God" (Eph. 5:5). Covetousness shouldn't be named among us (Eph. 5:3). The problem with covetousness is the fact of desire in itself, but desire for that which is our neighbor's. Buddhism, not Christianity that blames desire as root of all suffering. You arrive at Nirvana by ridding yourself of desire through the eightfold path. But the triune God wants to order, strengthen, and bless our desires: "[He] will render to each one according to his deeds: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality" (Rom. 2:6-7). C.S. Lewis: "It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." Though covetousness is a perversion of true, godly desire, it can still be all-consuming. Consider the time you spend wishing you had a better house, marriage, spouse, family, an improved lifestyle, more income or ability, or all the shiny things your neighbor has that you don't. Covetousness is equally expressed by sadness about what we lack as it is in the effort to gain. For anything we can lawfully possess, there's nothing wrong with being glad to receive it from God in order to serve Him with it. But this healthy desire doesn't stare at it on the internet for hours and then move on to covet the next thing (cf. Eccles. 5:10). Covetousness is often at work in discontent marriages, dissatisfaction with children ("I wish you'd get good grades like the Jones' boy"), and complaints at work.

NOTES:

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Mimetic Desire

The tenth commandment relentlessly points out the stuff belonging to our neighbor. It's at the store, but we covet because we see it at his house. The French philosopher Rene Girard coined the term *mimetic desire* to describe the way we want things that belong to those most like us, the ones we naturally compare ourselves to. We look over at someone so similar to us in whatever number of ways and ask, "Why don't I have that _____ like they do?!" If you have ever wondered why two people who are so alike that they should be good friends, but instead have conflict, this is often what is happening in at least one person. What should bolster camaraderie turns to covetousness, which grows into hatred, rivalry, competition, envy, and if not stopped, violence: "Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war" (Jms. 4:1-2). The only difference between Cain and Abel was that God received Abel's offering. This is what angered Cain, and instead of acknowledging God's righteousness, taking responsibility, and ruling over his sin, he blamed Abel and murdered him (Gen. 4:4-8). When we don't love God with all we have and are, we desire stuff that can't satisfy us, and we necessarily believe we are justified in the pursuit of whatever is our neighbor's. He or she has relationships and things, which we believe if we possessed them would make us happy, and so we covet believing *it's only fair for us to get them*. You are unlikely to see Bill Gate's house online and really want it. You are more likely to see your friend's house, who is so much like you, and think about what it would be like to have it. This is why the Lord Jesus was murdered: "For [Pilate] knew that they had handed Him over because of envy" (Matt. 27:18).

The Secret of Contentment

One of the best and most offensive diagnostic tools for covetousness is Jesus' Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16). In it the master agrees to pay the workers a denarius for a twelve-hour shift, but then he goes out and hires more at the third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh hours, promising to pay "whatever is right." At the end of the day, he pays the last crew a denarius first, and then everyone else the same, who then are offended for not getting more. He responds: "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?" (vv13-15). If you could press a button and everyone you know, excluding yourself, would be \$100k richer, would you hesitate? The answer gives you a good idea whether you are covetous or not. The solution for covetousness is to treasure Christ, and see yourself as blessed by Him: "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" (Phil. 4:12-13, ESV). Loving and trust Jesus doesn't eliminate your bodily needs or healthy desires; it orders them. It makes you thankful for what He gives and content with when He gives it.