

“The Heart of Commandment-Keeping”

Exodus 20:17

December 18, 2005

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1 Kings 21:1-16

“Some time later there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. Ahab said to Naboth, “Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth.” But Naboth replied, “The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.” **So Ahab went home, sullen and angry** because Naboth the Jezreelite had said, “I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers.” **He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat.**

His wife Jezebel came in and asked him, “Why are you so sullen? Why won't you eat?” He answered her, “Because I said to Naboth the Jezreelite, ‘Sell me your vineyard; or if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard in its place.’ But he said, ‘I will not give you my vineyard.’ ”

Jezebel his wife said, “Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.” So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, placed his seal on them, and sent them to the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city with him. In those letters she wrote: “Proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people. But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them testify that he has cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death.”

So the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city did as Jezebel directed in the letters she had written to them.... As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned to death, she said to Ahab, “Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite that he refused to sell you. He is no longer alive, but dead.” When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth's vineyard.”

May God bless the reading and hearing of his Word.

Pray

Evil Ahab – He was pulled along by his own covetous heart.

He was “sullen and angry” and he “sulked and refused to eat.”

He was overcome with desire.

He could think of nothing else but that piece of land and when thwarted in his effort to acquire it, he was angry and almost sick.

Oh, I have watched it in my son.

He sees something that attracts him, he wants it, he fixes his mind on it, he won't talk about anything else, he plans how to get it, he parries every argument against getting it, he works feverishly to get sufficient money to purchase it, he sulks when the money isn't acquired fast enough, he's angry when he is refused immediate gratification, and his greed knows no shame.

I have watched other children, and my own, spy something they want which another child has.

When younger, and least able, they will simply try to use raw power to get it.

But when they are a little older they will plot, then distract and deceive, and then take.

Oh, Ahab, your kind is still with us.

Greed, envy and covetousness are all bound together.

Greed is that insatiable desire for more.

Envy is that resentful awareness of the other's advantage.

Coveting is that powerful desire to get what belongs to another.

God has said in Exodus 20:17, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

Covet? Who me?

Have we not all felt that twinge of envy as we observed the prosperity of someone else?

Have we not all been somewhat offended when someone else gets what we think we deserve?

Have we not often found ourselves unable to truly rejoice with another when they, the same age, education, and experience, get more than we get?

Have we not all experienced the quickening of our pulses when we look at advertisements or when certain images appear on the television screen?

Oh, it comes in varying degrees but we've all felt it.

At its rawest it is a burning, compelling, almost visceral, desperate desire that seems to take over.

We identify with that raw coveting, most easily when it is sexual – we see a picture or a person and something happens inside - we crave!

And it is **most** powerful when what we want is not ours to have.

- Isaiah said we "burn with lust" (Isaiah 57:5)
- Paul spoke of it as "inflamed with lust" (Romans 1:27)
- Again he spoke of it as "Having lost all sensitivity, (we give ourselves)_over to sensuality..." (Ephesians 4:19)
- Jeremiah somewhat crudely likened it to an animal in "heat." (Jeremiah 2)

But coveting may not always be that out-of-control desire but may be a very quiet, calculated, deliberate and even patient direction of the mind and heart.

It becomes a settled direction of one's life - to get – AND to get it even if at our neighbor's expense.

One author wrote, "Ours is an age in which the appetite for more and more seems almost impossible to assuage. We find it increasingly difficult to maintain any sense of balance regarding our use of food; gadgets for home, office or auto; clothing; entertainment, or recreational goods and equipment." (Harrelson, in Fretheim, 238)

Many of you have already seen the recently released movie, “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.”

I’m sure you know it is based on the children’s book of the same title written by C.S. Lewis.

Surely Edmund’s controlling desire for Turkish Delight even at the expense of selling out his siblings, qualifies as covetousness.

If you have read much about the Englishman Lewis or have even seen the excellent movie about his life, “Shadowlands,” you know that he married an American woman by the name of Joy Davidman.

Davidman was also a writer and has written a provocative book on the 10 Commandments called Smoke on the Mountain, which is well worth reading.

“Most of us are modest enough in our demands. We reject the disease of greed, the perversion that turns a decent little shopkeeper into a recluse, dead of hunger on a mattress stuffed with ten-dollar bills; (or) the kind of greed that turns a cheerful girl in a shabby coat into a fretful neurotic in diamonds and mink... These we feel are exceptions and mental cases. We would never be like that. We... just want a standard of living that will enable us to maintain our self-respect. We’ve no (expectation of) a Cadillac – we’ll be satisfied with a Chevy, for this year at least; and of course we’ve got to buy a (HDTV), but that only because the kids are so humiliated (when inviting their friends to our house)...” (Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain*, 125)

One man calls coveting, a “sidelong glance” wherein we compare what others have with what we have. (Lochman, *Signposts to Freedom*, 151)

We don’t really mind if our neighbor has something, as long as he doesn’t have more than we do or, more likely, as long as we have just a little more.

One of Aesop’s fables tells of a man who was informed he could have anything he wished as long as he was willing for his neighbor to have twice as much of it. The man was so driven by envy that he wished to have **one** of his own eyes put out.

<http://www.mythfolklore.net/aesopica/oxford/162.htm>

But God said, “You shall not covet...”

But please understand this command does not prohibit all desire.

This is not stoicism, asceticism, or Buddhism's Nirvana with the loss of all desire.

It is right for a young man to desire a young woman.

One can desire food or crave warmth when cold.

It isn't that we are to be passionless but that we control our minds and bodies rather than them controlling us.

Paul called it self-controlled in 1 Timothy 3.

What is prohibited is a self-centered, self-obsessed, lust for our own advantage that disregards others – even if those “others,” those “neighbors” live on the other side of the world.

It seems that God placed the commandments hardest to keep at the beginning and the end.

In fact the two are quite similar.

The first says, “You shall have no other gods before me.”

The last says “Don't covet” or in essence, “Don't set your affections on something else and think it will satisfy you.”

The first is about trusting and serving God alone.

The last is about trusting and serving something else.

The first is about God being God in our lives.

The last is about something else being god in our lives.

In the Garden of Eden the Serpent said, “If you just could have that, you would be as gods.”

And in a moment Adam and Eve switched allegiance from God to things.

Their fundamental belief became that more would somehow bring satisfaction.

All people since have the same basic conviction that when we and all people have enough then we will become contented, peaceful, loving and just individuals.

(Davidman, Smoke on the Mountain, 117)

So from the very beginning that lust for more has driven people.
Not a lot more, after all we're not greedy, just a little more.

D. R. Davies wrote, "Poverty has been promoted to be the chief evil of human existence... Men can no longer be judged to be poor by what they consume, but by what they think they should consume and do not... Even though their bellies be bursting with chicken, the vast majority of people would still be poor if a minority of bellies were bursting with turkey." (D.R. Davies The Sin of our Age, in Davidman, Smoke on the Mountain, 124)

And so we covet.

What do you covet?

- Are you longing for a relationship with someone who happens to be someone else's spouse?
- Do you want the respect and the reputation that belongs to another person?
- Do you see what someone else has and long for it for yourself?
- Have you been so determined to get what you long for that you were willing to mortgage the future with debt?

A few hundred years ago the Puritan pastor, Thomas Watson said we are covetous when: (Watson, The Ten Commandments, 175-6)

When our **thoughts** are largely taken up with acquisitions.

We think mainly of getting, saving, spending, etc.

Our lives are largely given to planning, plotting and projecting how we can get.

What do you most think about?

Another sign of covetous is when we spend more **effort** getting things or position than pursuing the Kingdom of God.

We will wear ourselves out pursuing the things we want but will give only passing attention or effort to the things that last forever.

As Watson said it, Such a man "hunts for the world, he only wishes for heaven."

Michael Horton said, "We are suckers for the latest products promising the latest cure for what the

world has decided to be our latest problem (or need).” (Horton, The Law of Perfect Freedom, 251)

Whether it is work, recreation or just leisure, it is given more time and energy than the Kingdom of God.

What gets your best investment?

We are also covetous when our **conversation** is mostly about our needs and wants.

Our hearts are betrayed by what we talk about most.

Jesus said in Luke 6:45 “For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.”

What do you talk about most?

And we are covetous when we will **stoop to unlawful or just unethical means** to get what we want.

When we succumb to the temptations to cut corners, to pad expense accounts, and not to declare income, covetousness has taken hold.

All of the other commandments except the first and last speak of an action we take, or do not take, that is sin.

- You shall not make an idol
- You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God
- Remember the Sabbath.
- Honor your father and mother.
- You shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, or bear false witness

It is true that each of them speaks not only to action but also by implication to motivation, but this commandment, “You shall not covet” goes deepest into our hearts, to the very bottom – not what we do but what motivates us to do.

This commandment is speaking of that scheming of the heart; the very plotting in our hearts that leads us to break the other commandments.

Martin Luther wrote, “This last commandment is addressed not to those whom the world considers wicked rogues, but precisely to the most upright – to people who wish to be commended as honest and virtuous because **they** have not offended against the preceding commandments. (Luther’s Large Catechism)

Remember the man who came to Jesus, who asked in Matthew 19:16-22 “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”

... Jesus replied, ‘If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.’

“Which ones?” the man inquired.

Jesus replied, ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’

‘All these I have kept,’ the young man said. ‘What do I still lack?’

Jesus answered, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.”

I’m sure you, too, hear it, the problem was not in the man’s actions, he’d kept eight of the Commandments, the problem was in his heart – the 10th C.

Jan Lochman wrote, “The 10th Commandment is no mere appendix to the Decalogue... It uncovers the invisible mass of the iceberg of sin (under the surface of our hearts); it seeks to illuminate the ‘dark cellars’ of our houses of bondage, to unmask the hidden impulses and (machinations) of our lust for possession and power. It is a summons for us to look into our own hearts and inner inclinations...”

(Lochman, 153)

Sin is an unpopular word in our culture because it suggests a negative predisposition of the human personality rather than how we prefer to think of ourselves as having a basic goodness.

But that fundamental issue is one to which the Scriptures speaks extensively as in Jeremiah 17:9 where God declares, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.”

The 10th Commandment is getting at the real us beneath our actions. Coveting isn't wrong only after taking a neighbor's field or his spouse – it is wrong in the very attitude.

Jesus, recalling the 10 Commandments, said in Matthew 15:19, "For out of the **heart** come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

True obedience then includes not only refraining from certain actions but also refraining from even wanting to.

One author wrote that there are four stages of desire:

The initial desire

Dwelling on the desire

Developing a plan to satisfy the desire

Acting out the plan. (Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, 340)

King Ahab, in the account I cited at the beginning of the message, experienced all of this, with the help of his wife.

He desired, he dwelled on it, they developed a plan and took what they wanted.

So did King David who demonstrated this in his sin with Bathsheba.

He glanced, he gaped and he got.

The 10th Commandment prohibits the gaping, that which lies somewhere between the initial desire and the acting out. (Douma, 341)

Or to cite Luther's oft-quoted advice – "You can't stop the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair."

But how do I do this, how do I avoid this propensity of my soul to covet?

How, especially when our whole culture seems to be built on greed? Many, from leaders of businesses to coaches of athletic teams, will tell us that greed is necessary, even good.

We sometimes think of it as the grease that makes the wheels of commerce and competition turn more freely.

It has become part of the very fabric of our culture as witnessed by our entertainment - game shows, gambling, much advertising, and more.

So what do I do?

I start with recognizing this sin for what it is – as even more of a problem for me than any of the other commandments, save the first.

The Apostle Paul said in Romans 7:7-8 “Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire.”

Contrary to the idea that knowing the law would help Paul keep the law, Paul said the law only made him more aware of his sin as something **deeper** than actions – as something in his very nature.

So I must recognize that while I may in my own strength control some of my actions, I find it impossible to alone control my heart.

And so I run to the Savior to cleanse me and, as King David said it, “create in me a pure heart, O God!”

I recognize my complete dependence on him.

And in the midst of that I recognize that the question is quite simply, “What or who do I trust?”

Do I trust God or do I trust possessions and position more?

Coveting finds a foothold because I don't trust God.

I covet because I think God is unfair in the distribution of things.

I covet because I think getting what I want will provide satisfaction.

No wonder God calls greed, idolatry (Colossians 3:5) – I am looking to something else to supply what only God can. (Davidman, Smoke on the Mountain, 123)

And I am dissatisfied with God's provision.

Someone rightly said, “To covet is to deny God's providence” <http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/exodus/>

We hear that denial in our prayers:

We come to God not because we love him but because we love our possessions and we think maybe we need to keep asking him to help us keep them.

And in that, Joy Davidman wrote, “we are still seeking God not for himself but so that we can hire him as night watchman (of our) mammon (our goods).” (Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain*, 127)

The antidote to covetousness is trust - to be content with God and what he supplies.

And again, contentment is not absence of feeling or caring.

- It doesn't mean I don't recognize that some have more than I have.
- It doesn't mean that I wouldn't prefer the situation were different.

But it **does** mean I can be content with God's provision in the moment and not controlled by my desire for more.

It is confidence in God.

I can place first things first and keep perspective on what is most important.

Michael Horton wrote, “At the bottom, this final commandment calls us to the conviction that God is good and that even our suffering or lack serves an ultimately benevolent purpose.” (Horton *The Law of Perfect Freedom* 244)

Proverbs 19:23 “The fear (the trust) of the LORD leads to life:
Then one rests content, untouched by trouble.”

To fear God means to recognize him as the ultimate reality.

This is no exaggeration; I often ask myself, “Jerry, do you believe God is truly there?” “Do you believe he is fully sovereign and wholly benevolent toward you?” “Do you trust him?”

The Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 4:11-13, 19 “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do everything through him who gives me strength... And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

Standard wisdom would say that we fight covetousness in these ways:

1st Don't dwell on those things that make you covet.

If Costco or Neiman Marcus stir up your greed – go less often.
If your neighbor's wife makes your heart beat faster – stay away.

2nd Immediately take every temptation to God in prayer.

When covetousness rears its ugly head, stop and pray, asking God's help.

3rd Be accountable to others for the weaknesses in your life.

These are good ideas but there is a better way.

You see, you can keep building higher levees to keep the water out or you can move to higher ground.

What keeps you from adultery? Is it lack of courage, fear of consequences or is it contentment with what God has given you?

What keeps you from stealing? Is it fear of consequences or is it a trust in God that leads to contentment with what he has provided?

The only way to ultimately conquer a covetous spirit is to go on the offensive and cultivate deeper desires than the ones that have been so tempting. Brian Morgan <http://www.pbcc.org/sermons/morgan/1487.html>

Matthew 6:31-33 “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need

them. ³³ But **seek first his kingdom and his righteousness**, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Someone else's spouse won't be so tempting if you will love your own.

You won't covet someone else's job, house, or 401k if you are invested in using what God has already given you to advance the kingdom of God – charity squelches covetousness.

You won't covet someone else's position or abilities if you **busy** using what God has already given you.

One man wrote, "Contentment ...is the grateful, faithful, fruitful use of what we have, little or much. It is to take the cup of Providence, and call upon the name of the Lord...To get all that is in the cup is the act and art of contentment. Not to drink because one has but half a cup, or because one does not like its flavor, or because somebody else has silver to one's own glass, is to lose the contents; and that is the penalty, if not the meaning, of discontent." Fredrick Bruce

A woman declared, "It is not our circumstances that create our discontent or contentment. It is us." Vivian Greene

At root the issue is what or who do I trust?

What do your fears say in answer to that question?

"I have to have a little more!"

What does God say?

Exodus 20:2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."

Don't reenter the prison of your own insatiable lusts.

Trust me! I am the LORD your God.

I have redeemed you, you are mine and I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Psalm 111:10 "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;

Exodus 20:17 "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

Nine Requisites for Contented Living:

- Health enough to make work a pleasure.
- Wealth enough to support your needs.
- Strength enough to battle with difficulties and overcome them.
- Grace enough to confess your sins and forsake them.
- Patience enough to toil until some good is accomplished.
- Charity enough to see some good in your neighbor.
- Love enough to move you to be useful and helpful to others.
- Faith enough to make real the things of God.
- Hope enough to remove all anxious fears concerning the future.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe

Gambling: One motivation makes it appealing – greed.

As I have often said, losing in gambling may be bad stewardship but winning is worse – it is stealing from the loser and greed is the motivation.

You can't have everything. Where would you put it? Stephen Wright

Who is whispering in your ear to have more? Is it advertising?

Giving someone knowledge about your product is not wrong.

But appealing to greed in doing so crosses the line.

Advertising executives spend a billion dollars a year in marketing research. A vast network of people, from Madison Avenue to Hollywood, spend their full work week designing novel ways to trigger our desires. Music, slogans, Technicolor sights, digitally produced sounds, and dramatic movement, all collaborate to create a passion to possess. Nothing is beyond consideration. They use envy, pride, fear, jealousy, nostalgia, and sex to produce the desired effect. Their goal, like that of all salesmen, is to temporarily suspend our self-control. Unfortunately they are creating a pattern of thinking — an attitude of covetousness that will continue long after their product is forgotten. They are creating dissatisfaction with life. They want you to want more. *Visualize it. Desire it. See yourself in it. And you will possess it!* This is where many people live.

From J. David Hoke <http://www.horizonsnet.org/sermons/tc10.html>

But it is what is in our heart that is most destructive.

“The customer is king and the advertiser is his court jester.”

(Douma, 346)

Advertising aims directly at “the lust for more” that already exists within us.

Heidelberg Catechism:

Question 113 “What does the tenth commandment require of us?”

Answer: That even the smallest inclination or thought, contrary to any of God's commandments, never rise in our hearts; but that at all times we hate all sin with our whole heart, and delight in all righteousness.

Westminster Shorter Catechism

Q. 80. What is required in the tenth commandment?

A. The tenth commandment requireth full contentment with our own condition, with a right and charitable frame of spirit toward our neighbor, and all that is his.

Q. 81. What is forbidden in the tenth commandment?

A. The tenth commandment forbiddeth all discontentment with our own estate, envying or grieving at the good of our neighbor, and all inordinate motions and affections to anything that is his.

Westminster Larger Catechism

Q. 147. What are the duties required in the tenth commandment?

A. The duties required in the tenth commandment are, such a full contentment with our own condition, and such a charitable frame of the whole soul toward our neighbour, as that all our inward motions and affections touching him, tend unto, and further all that good which is his.

Q. 148. What are the sins forbidden in the tenth commandment?

A. The sins forbidden in the tenth commandment are, discontentment with our own estate; envying and grieving at the good of our neighbour, together with all inordinate motions and affections to anything that is his..

“Our lust for possession and power not only orbits egotistically around our own personal interests but in doing so also runs counter to the interests of our fellow human beings.” (Lochman, 155)

This covetousness extends to worldwide issues. Trade, environmental issues, economic colonization, even wars may be more out of covetousness than any true self-preservation. Especially we in a democratic society must hold our governments responsible for ethical and righteous actions.

A pirate asked to defend his life of piracy, is reported to have said to Alexander the Great, “I was merely doing the same as you, when you made the world unsafe. But since I work with a small ship, I am called a pirate; you are called a king, because you work with a whole fleet.”

(in Douma, The Ten Commandments, 344)