

The Tenth Commandment

“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” (Exodus 20:17).

I. The Demon Possessed Law-Keeper

“When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none. Then he says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. So shall it also be with this wicked generation” (Matthew 12:42-45).

Law-Keepers?

Jesus was surrounded by people who, for some reason, thought they were very good at keeping the law of God. He tells this story in the midst of these self-proclaimed law-keepers. Although I believe the lesson Christ gives here primarily applies to Israel as a nation, it still has application to the individuals who make up that nation. I also believe the principle taught here can apply to any nation or individual in history. Before we pursue our study of the Tenth Commandment, let’s examine this particular passage of Scripture.

First, let’s look at the nature of the evil spirit. The evil spirit finds itself driven out of a man and wandering through the dry places. The evil spirit is not content unless it torments so it seeks refuge by re-entering its prior victim.

Secondly, we examine the victim. The victim has cleaned up his house. It is swept and put in order. But one other thing is said about the house—it’s empty. Being empty the demon finds seven other demons worse than himself to occupy the empty man. The victim is now in more troubled than before. There’s an old saying, “There’s nothing worse than a reformed drunk.” This statement may be truer than we think.

The Danger of Success

One of the dangers of studying the law comes when there is a limited amount of success in keeping it. We might feel that we are now demon free. But, as William Hendriksen wrote, “**...harmlessness is not the same as holiness.**”

Desisting from wrong differs by a whole heaven from being a blessing.”¹ We must not allow our house to remain empty, otherwise we’ll be demon free but open for business. We must be indwelt by the Spirit of God (Romans 8:11) which is evidenced by faith in Christ for the forgiveness of our lawlessness.

II. A History of Coveting

Covet Defined

According to Vines, covet or ‘Epithumeo’ means to fix the desire upon (*epi*, upon, used intensively, *thumos*, passion).² It means to long for or lust after. Usually the word ‘covet’ is used with the meaning to covet evilly. In Hebrew, the word is ‘Hamad’. It refers to an inordinate, ungoverned, selfish desire.³

The First Sin

For a powerful example of coveting let’s go to the very beginning.

“Then the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4,5).

It was, and often still is, man’s inordinate desire to be in control of his own destiny, to be “like God”, that leads him into great and certain turmoil. The enemy knew that before he could get Adam and Eve to disobey God he had to get them to a boiling point of desire, lust, covetousness.

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make *one* wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate” (Genesis 3:6).

This particular sin effected the entire human race. It all starts with coveting.

Ahab

Arguably, coveting is the sin that leads to all other sins. We see numerable accounts in Scripture where a covetous spirit leads to treachery. Read the story of Naboth’s vineyard.

¹ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Baker Book House, 1973), p. 540.

² *Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Macdonald Publishing), p. 254.

³ *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, Volume 1* (Moody Press, 1980), p. 295.

“Now it came about after these things, that Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard which was in Jezreel beside the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. And Ahab spoke to Naboth, saying, ‘Give me your vineyard, that I may have it for a vegetable garden because it is close beside my house, and I will give you a better vineyard than it in its place; if you like, I will give you the price of it in money.’ But Naboth said to Ahab, ‘The LORD forbid me that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.’ So Ahab came into his house sullen and vexed because of the word which Naboth the Jezreelite had spoken to him; for he said, ‘I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers.’ And he lay down on his bed and turned away his face and ate no food”(1 Kings 21:1-4).

Poor, poor Ahab! We learn in the rest of the story that Jezebel (with less than honorable motives) plotted to kill Naboth and obtain the plot of land for her husband. Ahab, “sullen and vexed” and overcome with covetousness made no effort to keep his wife from perpetrating this heinous act, and eventually his wife, and his descendants, found themselves under great judgment.

David

Then there is the very popular example of David.

“Then it happened one evening that David arose from his bed and walked on the roof of the king’s house. And from the roof he saw a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful to behold. So David sent and inquired about the woman” (2 Samuel 11:2,3).

We see a similar violation and judgment upon King David who coveting David ended up taking Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, for himself and impregnating her. In order to hide this evil deed, he ended up killing her husband. He and his family found themselves under the judgment of God. In David’s situation an entire nation was eventually affected. This all started with coveting.

Paul

Coveting was the sin that brought the Apostle Paul to his knees.

“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.” But sin, taking opportunity

through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead.... 13 Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful” (Romans 7:7,8 & 13).

Universal Failure

One of the things we want to avoid is thinking we're pretty good at keeping the Ten Commandments. If you've read this far you, hopefully, understand that you, and I, and everyone else, continually break all ten all the time. Even people who have deluded themselves into thinking that they're pretty good at keeping the commandments cannot deny their violation of this commandment. No honest person denies the existence of covetousness in their life.

III. The Road to Covetousness

According to the *Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession Standards*,

“The Tenth Commandment Requireth Full Contentment With Our Own Condition, With A Right and Charitable Frame of Spirit Toward Our Neighbour, and All That Is His.”

Lack of Contentment

Covetousness is established by our lack of contentment with the allotment of God's providence in our lives. This does not mean that we advocate a stoic lifestyle of apathy and indifference. Goals, ambitions and desires can be a very good thing. We are certainly called to run our race to win; to work heartily as unto the Lord; to pray that God will increase our flock and prosper our household. All the time remembering...

“The horse is prepared for the day of battle, But deliverance is of the LORD” (Proverbs 21:31).

The road to covetousness comes when we do not have the vision to find our chief happiness in God and what He, according to His divine wisdom, chooses to give us. Covetousness come when we ignore thanking God for His graciousness in what we presently have. The Psalmist rejoices...

“O LORD, YOU are the portion of my inheritance and my cup; You maintain my lot. The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places; Yes, I have a good inheritance” (Psalm 16:5,6).

Paul gives a warning regarding the place where being a malcontent can lead.

“But godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang” (1 Timothy 6:6-10).

Riches, material or otherwise, are not necessarily evil. But they can become very evil and destructive if we set our heart upon them.

“If riches increase, do not set *your* heart upon them” (Psalm 62:10).

“And He said to them, “Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions” (Luke 12:15).

Paul, who was converted as result of realizing that he was covetous, later states that he had learned to be content.

“Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need” (Philippians 4:11).

Enjoying God’s Providence

Do you have—do you desire—the wisdom and vision to enjoy God’s providence even now. As one brother is fond of saying, “It’s all part of life’s rich pageant, I wouldn’t change a thing.” The violation of this commandment comes from a heart of discontent. “Give me more Lord! Give me more!” is so often the cry. Do you find yourself longing to be in some other time, or somewhere else, or even someone else? Do you find yourself cursing God’s providence in your

life and longing, as some do, to be delivered from their present state by the, so called, secret rapture⁴? I wonder if we know what an affront to God this actually is and how it leads to so many evils when we consider that God Himself **“ordained our days before there was yet one” (Psalm 139:16)** and Christ Himself challenges and assures us...

“Let your character be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, “I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU” (Hebrews 13:5).

IV. Obtaining Contentment

Since lack of contentment is the primary stumbling block in regard to this commandment, how does one attain contentment? I would like to finish instruction on this commandment by borrowing from Thomas Vincent's, *A Family Instructional Guide*,⁵ which gives instructions on how we may attain contentment in a low, poor and afflicted condition.

Godliness

“First, by attaining true godliness, to which alone true contentment is accompanied.”

Paul writes to Timothy that,

“Godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6).

Seeking Godliness applies to the pursuit of every commandment. A life full of sin is a breeding ground of discontentedness and covetousness.

God's Providence

“Secondly, by being fully persuaded of, seriously and understandingly eyeing the wise and good hand of God's providence in his disposal of us, and bringing any affliction upon us.” Job writes,

“The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21).

The Psalmist also records,

⁴ I do believe there will be a rapture but I prefer to call it the resurrection. I certainly don't think, however, it's going to be a secret.

⁵ Vincent, Thomas, *A Family Instructional Guide*, (Escondido, CA: Ephesians Four Group) 1999.

“I was mute, I did not open my mouth, Because it was You who did it” (Psalm 39:9).

And again,

“I know, O LORD, that Your judgments are right, And that in faithfulness You have afflicted me” (Psalm 119:75).

Some find more comfort in thinking Satan is in charge. Not only is that unbiblical, but it escapes all logic to take comfort in thinking that your life is in the control of Satan over Christ.

God’s Benevolence

“Thirdly, by trusting in God’s promise to cause all things, even the worst things that can befall us, to work together for our good.”

There is not a thing that transpires in our lives that is not part of the divine orchestration of God for our ultimate well being. Paul writes,

“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Humility

“Fourth, by humility, and a deep sense of our undeservings and ill deservings at God’s hands for our sins.”

As one great reformed theologian stated, “You have no concept of the depth of your sin.” Do our attitudes reflect Jacob’s sentiment?

“I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant” (Genesis 32:10).

And again in Daniel,

“O Lord, to us belongs shame of face, to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, because we have sinned against You” (Daniel 9:8).

We will find that we will covet less when we realize that God owes us nothing but judgment and grants us, as His children, nothing but mercy.

Perspective

“Fifth, by looking to others better than ourselves, who have been lower in the world and more afflicted than we have been.”

The Scriptures teach that our Savior had no where to lay his head. We read in Hebrews that those, of whom the world was not worthy, had no certain dwelling place in the world and many of them were destitute, afflicted, and tormented. People talk about how bad times are, but where and when would you rather be than in twentieth century evangelized America? Would you rather be a victim of Lenin or Stalin? Would you rather be one of the oppressed during of the reign of terror or Spanish Inquisition? Would you rather be living in the dark ages, where a birth complication or appendicitis meant certain death? Would you rather have lived during the Roman conquests? During the time of Babylon? The list goes on. It may be worse in America in 2000 than it was in America in 1960, but you can't judge history in forty year chunks. You need to look at four or five hundred year chunks. I'll take the one I'm living in.

Heavenly Minded

“Sixth, by laboring so much the more to abound in spiritual riches, the less we have of temporal; and if we have no earthly inheritance to secure our right to, living by faith upon our heavenly inheritance; hereby the poorest some become the richest, and those that have most outward trouble have most inward joy”

As Christians our treasure must be that which has the most value. For the things which have the most value, God gives in abundance. Even though it is not very Christian to be anti-material, we must realize that material things can be taken from us at any moment. We must, therefore, set our hearts on that which is eternal.

“Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world *to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him*” (James 2:5)?

Worldly Destiny

“Seventh, considering how we brought nothing into the world, and that we can carry nothing with us out of it.”

We must keep everything in perspective. The well-known bumper-sticker reads, “He Who Dies With The Most Toys Wins.” It should read, “He Who Dies With The Most Toys Is Dead.” As Job records,

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, And naked shall I return there. (Job 1:21).

Paul instructs his young protégé in the ministry,

“For we brought nothing into *this* world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. ⁸ And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content” (1 Timothy 6:7, 8).

It seems little kids are most ill-behaved when they go to Disneyland. They allow their lust for enjoyment bring out the worst in them. We must be careful not to be babes in this respect. In the four score God granted us on this earth, we ought not allow His gifts to bring out the worst in us.

Example of Christ

“Eighth by going to Christ to teach us the lesson of universal contentment, and fetching strength from him to exercise this grace in every condition.”

We must continually go to Christ and learn from Him. His promises are great and His promises are sure. Paul writes,

“Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: ¹² I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. ¹³ I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:11–13).

Beloved, covetousness is a sin whose food is malcontent and whose symptoms are ruin and destruction. I pray that we would all have the ears to hear and eyes to see the graciousness of God’s grace. I pray that in our headlong pursuit of those things in this world, some which are even good and proper, we would never lose sight of the beauty of today and the glory of God’s providence in every small and wondrous creature and event that crosses our paths. Before we attempt to change the world to suit our fancies, let our hearts be changed to delight in the Lord, allowing Him to give us the desires of our heart according to His infinite wisdom and goodness.

Meditate On Them

“Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful; ²But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night.³He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, That brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper” (Psalm 1:1-3).

Only Two Counsels

It is my prayer that these pages have been a blessing to you. We must always keep in mind that since the time of Adam it has been an unlawful use of the law to seek salvation by the keeping of it. That comes by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. He kept the law perfectly and freely gives us his righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21). Nevertheless the law of God is a source of great blessing. The only alternative to the law of God is the counsel of the ungodly. I pray that we all, through the course of our lives, will take the advice of David and meditate on God’s law day and night—that we will be like a tree firmly planted by the rivers of water—that we will bring forth fruit in our season—that our leaf will not wither and in all we do we will prosper.

V. Obtaining

We have now studied the Ten Commandments. And although we have written much, we have only scratched the surface of the fullness of God’s law. As we conclude our devotions here, let us be reminded of how we are to think of the law. The apostle Paul treats law in some detail in Galatians.

“Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified. (Gal. 2:16)

Justification

I cannot think of too many things in Christianity, in life, more important than understanding justification by faith. What is justification? Justification is a forensic or legal declaration of not guilty. To be justified means to stand before God and be acquitted. To be justified means to have the confidence that no one can bring a charge against us as God’s elect (Romans 8:33).

To be justified means that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ—not tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword. To be justified means that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. As you can see, justification is very important.

So how is one justified? The verse just cited teaches us that we are not justified by the works of the law. In other words, justification has nothing to do with our character, our intellect, our morality, our presence of mind, the meritorious nature of our own faith, or any other attribute or quality we may possess. Romans 8:33 teaches us that it is God who justifies. Paul goes on to teach in Galatians,

“For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, *“Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.”* ¹¹ But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for *“the just shall live by faith.”* ¹² Yet the law is not of faith, but *“the man who does them shall live by them.”* ¹³ Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, *“Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”*), ¹⁴ that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Galatians 3:10-14).

If we are looking to any aspect of our own being for our justification, we are truly lost, for we are required to succeed perfectly in all things which are written in the book of the law, and who has done that but Jesus? But the justified man lives by faith. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us. That is to say, the condemnation we deserved, He took. And the righteousness that He lived, we freely received. The promise to Abraham was that through his seed all the nations of the world would be blessed. And if we have been made right before God it is because of God fulfilling His promise through Christ Jesus.

Our best efforts to keep the law of God should, and will, yield better churches, families and nations. But our best efforts to keep the law will also yield eternal damnation apart from a God given faith in Jesus Christ. And as much as I desire to see strong churches, families and nations, what I desire the law achieve even more is a hunger and passion for the cross of Christ. Amen.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What was the downfall of the demon possessed law-keeper?
2. What is the danger is successful law keeping?
3. Review the examples of coveting in Scripture. Can you think of others?
4. What is the primary flaw in our character that leads to covetousness?
5. Discuss enjoying God's providence. How can this be achieved when things are tough?
6. Go over the Family Instructional Guide regarding the obtaining of contentment.
7. What are our two options when it comes to receiving counsel?
8. What is justification? Why is this important?
9. Discuss the role of the law with justification.

How is one justified?