

## You Shall Not Covet

TEXT: Ex 20:17

PHBF 11.18.12

Scr. Reading: Exodus 20:1-21

Walking Straight: Exodus, part 2

### [Quote SOS verses with congregation]

At first glance, “You shall not covet” seems like a rather anti-climactic ending to the Ten Commandments. All the dramatic, scandalous sins come previously: murder, adultery, theft, lying. And don’t forget the setting: the mountain is smoking and shaking, God’s voice is thundering, Israelite culture (and Western culture after it) is taking shape as the Ten Commandments are coming down... and the whole scene ends on a note about your neighbor’s donkey??

But think for a moment about how different our culture might be if everyone managed to keep this one commandment:

- How many criminals would have a clean record, unmotivated by covetousness to steal or even kill?
- How many children would still be living with both birth parents and how many marriages would have stayed together if no one coveted the spouse God gave someone else?
- How many families would have older cars, fewer toys, and smaller houses... but would also have made more memories together as a family, have spent more time with friends, and have made more of a difference in the lives of the poor?
- How would advertising change if companies had to appeal to real need with real solutions, instead of taking advantage of our utter inability to keep the Tenth Commandment? Would the Super Bowl become the Pretty OK Bowl?
- How many stores and service companies would go out of business altogether?
- How many therapists, counselors, and pharmacists would have less work if people stopped coveting and just learned to be content?
- How would pay scales change? Would professional athletes, actors, and pop musicians still make 10x the salary of doctors, nurses, teachers, farmers, and military personnel?
- How would it change our experience of Christmas? When would we start to shop? How much would we spend? Would presents

or people be our focus? And isn’t it convenient that we’re talking about this 5 days before the biggest shopping day of the year—Black Friday?!

When you think about it that way, maybe this isn’t such an anti-climactic ending to the Ten Commandments. Maybe it is a big deal to covet. Jesus and Paul certainly think so. Jesus lists it with the other “big sins”:

**Mark 7:21-22** *For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup> coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.*

And Paul says those who covet will not inherit the kingdom of God:

**Ephesians 5:3, 5** *But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. <sup>5</sup> For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.*

If you look at it more closely, you get a sense of its importance from the commandment itself:

- It’s the first and only commandment addressed directly to the inner life.
- It’s more lengthy than several of the other, more “important” commands that precede it: murder, adultery, stealing.
- It goes into much more detail than those commands, listing a half dozen items (house, wife, male servant, female servant, ox, donkey) and then closing all loopholes with the phrase “anything that is your neighbor’s.”
- It’s the only commandment stated twice: “You shall not covet... you shall not covet...”

It’s more emphatic, more lengthy, and more detailed than several of the other commands. Why? Perhaps because of our tendency to minimize this sin and our tendency to excuse ourselves regarding it. But a closer look will challenge both tendencies.

### What is coveting?

To covet is to crave, to yearn for, to hanker after something. The Hebrew word here isn’t always used negatively:

**Psalms 19:10** *More to be desired are they than gold*

**Psalms 68:16** *Why do you look with hatred, O many-peaked mountain, at*

*the mount that God desired for his abode...*

Covetousness is not a dark, evil, mysterious, and relatively rare impulse. It's simple longing. To covet is simply to desire.

This point is made explicitly in Deuteronomy 5, where the Ten Commandments are reiterated:

**Deuteronomy 5:21** *"And you shall not covet your neighbor's wife. And you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field, or his male servant, or his female servant, his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."*

Notice how the word "desire" substitutes for "covet" in the second part of the command. Two different words in Hebrew, the first often translated "covet/desire" and the second often rendered "crave/desire/long for."

There's one other place in the Bible where these two words are used together: Genesis 3:6, the Fall (in reverse order from Dt 5:21).

**Genesis 3:6** *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.*

In the Garden, Adam & Eve had plenty, everything they could desire – selection, enjoyment, delight, harmony. The first act of human sin is an act of unrestrained craving. Two important insights from this passage:

First, we see that not all longing or desire is wrong. Desire itself isn't the problem; it's misplaced desire that gets us into trouble. What is forbidden is desire for something God has withheld or given to someone else. This, of course, is the point of listing a bunch of things *that belong to my neighbor*. Wanting a house isn't so much the problem; it's when I want the house God has given someone else.

Second, notice how mundane the things are that can get us into trouble. In Eve's case, it was a piece of forbidden fruit. In the Tenth Commandment, it's house, wife, servants, ox, donkey. Coveting concerns the things we see every day, not just the big items we drool over in the catalogue. It's common, everyday desire for common, everyday things... things which God has withheld... things which God has chosen to give to someone else.

## What's wrong with coveting?

### 1. Destructive to neighbor

Breaking the Tenth Commandment can easily lead to breaking several of the others – coveting wife could lead to adultery, coveting animals could lead to stealing, coveting house could lead to murder...

**1 Timothy 6:9-10** <sup>9</sup> *But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. <sup>10</sup> For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils.*

This commandment truly is a capstone to the Ten, not an afterthought. Breaking the 10<sup>th</sup> often means we're on our way to breaking one or more of the others.

**James 4:2** *You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.*

### 2. Distressing to self

Every one of us longs to be satisfied. We can't help it—God made us that way. Desire is part of who we are. We all long for joy, satisfaction, fulfillment, happiness. The Bible doesn't deny this or ignore it. It assumes it. In fact, the Bible commands it.

**Deuteronomy 28:47-48** <sup>47</sup> *Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, <sup>48</sup> therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you.*

**Psalms 100:1-2** *Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth! <sup>2</sup> Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!*

Nowhere in the Bible are we told to be bored with life or to stop wanting to be happy. Rather, the Bible assumes that we are on a quest for happiness. The Bible assumes we will always "covet" something.

So why do the Ten Commandments forbid coveting what belongs to neighbor? To find the answer, we have to remember here what the Ten Commandments *are*: "teaching" from our good Creator about how to

negotiate through life in His world. I say “teaching” instead of “law” because the Hebrew word “torah” literally means “teaching.” What we call “law” is actually God’s “teaching,” a gracious word from the Creator to the created, from the Redeemer to the redeemed. As Creator, God gives commands that fit with the way He has made the world. God knows we long to be satisfied. He made us that way. But He shaped that void in our soul in a very specific way, such that it can be filled with only one thing.

Why do the Ten Commandments forbid coveting what belongs to neighbor? Because what my neighbor has will never satisfy my soul... or his, for that matter. What will?

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probably explanation is that I was made for another world. ~ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Or as the Scripture says:

**Psalms 37:4** *Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

“Do not covet your neighbor’s stuff” is another way of saying “Delight yourself in the Lord.” Anything less will leave me vexed and distressed in soul.

NOTE: The Hebrew word for “covet” is sometimes translated “precious” (Ps 39:11, Pro 21:20 “Precious treasure and oil are in a wise man’s dwelling.”) This commandment – particularly the word “covet” – brings Gollum to mind—his self-destructive, inexorable desire for “the precious,” twisting him into a pitiful, hallowed out shell of his former self. It’s a graphic illustration of why “Do not covet” is good news from the God who loves us.

### 3. Dishonoring to God

Coveting dishonors God in questioning the goodness of His provision. Even more, it dishonors him in how He claims to satisfy the soul. Covetousness says to God, “You aren’t enough for me. I need more if I am going to be happy.”

The prohibition against coveting is a safeguard of the worship of God

alone (the 1<sup>st</sup> commandment). Violating the 10<sup>th</sup> is actually a violation of the 1<sup>st</sup>. Coveting is choosing to pursue another god, the god of this object or that lifestyle or this aspiration...

The first and last commandments are bookends, and they are integrally related to each other. When we break the 10<sup>th</sup>, it means we’ve broken the 1<sup>st</sup>.

**Colossians 3:5** *Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.*

### Getting to Jesus

Contentment must be *learned*. It’s not natural.

**Philippians 4:11** *Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.*

How do we learn it? How do we stop the relentless cycle of coveting, acquiring, finding it’s not enough, and coveting again? The solution is not to cease desiring; it’s to replace desire for the stuff of another with desire for Jesus. But that’s not as easy as it sounds.

In our first sermon on the Ten Commandments, we made the point that these commands show us more than our duties. They show us our God. God’s law flows out of who He is.

The Ten Commandments tell us what God would look like if he were human. And sixteen hundred years after giving them to his people, God did come to earth as a man to live a life of perfect obedience. (Jani Ortlund, *His Loving Law*, 161)

But when He came, He didn’t look anything like we’d expect. The Hebrew word “covet” appears about 27 times in the OT. One of the most intriguing is in Isaiah:

**Isaiah 53:2** *For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.*

Jesus laid aside everything we would have coveted. Nothing left we would desire. No appeal to us whatsoever. Plain. Sad. Despised. Desiring Him isn’t a natural affection.

Until we really look beneath the surface. Unless we stop to ponder who He really is. Until we take the time to really consider Jesus, remember Jesus, meditate upon Jesus, see Jesus, our hearts will continue to covet. Black Friday will continue to promise paradise. Our lives will be restless.

But if we stop to consider... to remember... to meditate... to set our heart... to seek...

**Colossians 3:1-5** *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. <sup>3</sup> For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. <sup>5</sup> ¶ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.*

The Tenth Commandment points us to Jesus. It tells us we will never be satisfied with our neighbor's stuff. He, not all these things, is the desire of our soul. Let the Ten Commandments point you to Jesus. Consider:

- He is the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt and house of slavery. He is the God you must have.
- He is the living word and visible image of God the Father.
- He bears the Name above every name.
- He is the Sabbath, where our hearts finally find rest.
- He redefines Father and family and He deserves all honor.
- He protects and preserves life, giving His own so we all could avoid murderous end of our sin.
- He the Faithful Spouse who keeps covenant with His bride.
- He is the rich man who, instead of hoarding or stealing, gave everything He had to make us poor people rich.
- He is the Faithful Witness who defends us before the Father.
- And He is the coveted treasure who alone will satisfy our soul.

Friends, it's time for you to close—really close with Jesus.

**Hebrews 13:5** *Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."*

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