

yTenth Commandment: Do Not Covet

Randy Bowman

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Ten Commandments Class

Introduction

There is in each of us a fire that burns. It ignites our passions and flames our yearning for life. It is the pilot light of our souls. Without it, we would shrivel up and just die, because there would be nothing worth living for. Everyone has this pilot light, but not everyone's is fueled by the same thing. Tonight, we will look into the very center of man and explore the engine that propels him forward as we look at the Tenth Commandment.

See, the Tenth Commandment is about *desire*. It is about those things that burn us up on the inside. At its most basic level, without desire, we would be inert, inactive, unmotivated, and ultimately, not useful. Without WANTING something better, mankind would never have conquered the wilderness, or saved children from starving in distant lands or committed vast amounts of time and money in research for a cure for communicable diseases.

As we look at the Tenth Commandment, we are faced with a paradox: limiting that which is limitless, controlling that which is unbridled, reigning in that which is designed to make us run free.

As we look at the Tenth Commandment, we are faced with the commandment that we all must struggle with daily. Most of us won't commit the "biggie" sins like murder or adultery; but all of us, young and old, rich and poor, the powerful and the defenseless, will covet.

While the other nine commandments are primarily about deeds, this one deals with desire. The first nine, for the most part, have to do with visible actions. The Tenth Commandment refers to invisible attitudes. This command describes a secret sin. To control one's actions is one thing, but to control one's hidden thoughts and feelings, well, that is another thing all together. Bridling that inner part of us that always wants more is tough, yet this is what this final law deals with.

We will explore this commandment in three phases. First, we will look at the **Precept** and see if we can understand what the commandment says. Then, we will discuss the **Principles** that drive the precept. Finally we will look at the **Person** on whose life the principle has been distilled.

The Precept

What does it mean to covet?

There are two Hebrew words for *covet* and they are completely synonymous. First is *chamad* and it means "to desire." Second, is *a'vah* and it means "to want, to desire, or to lust after." What is interesting is that it has the same root as "to dwell, to abide."

This is significant because that connotes that coveting is not merely wanting something, but letting that want take up residence in one's mind and heart. It denotes an aspiration that is rooted deep within the human existence. It is more of a guttural craving, a soul-wrenching yearning. It is a want that becomes an all-consuming passion.

The word *chamad* is first used in Genesis 2:9. This is important because of the "rule of first mention" which is a principle that says that if you are to truly understand how a Hebrew word is to be used and understood, then you have to go to that portion of the Scriptures where a word is mentioned for the first time and to study the first occurrence of the same in order to get the fundamental inherent meaning of that word. After we understand the first occurrence, which is usually in the simplest form, we can then examine the word in other portions of the scriptures. We shall see that the fundamental concept in the first occurrence remains dominant as a rule, and colors all later additions to that doctrine. In view of this fact, it becomes imperative that we understand the law of first mention. So, with that in mind, let's look at how *chamad* is used in Genesis 2:9 and in Genesis 3:6.

In Genesis 2:9 we learn that ALL trees were "pleasant to the eye" (i.e, desirable). Here we see that the desire is neutral in meaning. When we desire the things God has made freely available for us, there is no sin. It is not wrong to want what God has provided.

Contrast that with Genesis 3:6, where we see that the word applied to something God has restricted from Man, the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Here, the desire becomes sinful.

What should we not covet?

When one first reads this passage, it appears to be too long. It would've been easy to just cut to the chase and say, "Don't covet anything that belongs to your neighbor." In fact, that is the way God ends it. So, that must mean the things He lists are important enough that they warrant specific mention. Let's take a look and see what is significant about each of these.

Do not covet your neighbor's house – Why would God tell a nomadic people not to covet their neighbor's house? Everybody lived in tents. This seems weird.

The principle that I see here is that we shouldn't ***desire the circumstances*** of our neighbor.

When the Israelites get to the Promise Land, each person will be apportioned land by casting lots (Joshua 8:10). Each tribe will get a section of land, then each family be bestowed with some land. The division of this land will be very "unfair" and "unjust." See, some land is better than others (Abraham and Lot).

It would be easy to get caught up in a mind set of “Why did the Smiths get that property and I got this one?” “Tom’s piece of land is bigger than mine.” “Her soil is more fertile than mine.” “The grass is greener over there, so his sheep will feed better than mine.” Any parent with kids who have tried to get split a piece of cake knows that a fight will ensue.

The thing is, though, that it is God who gives wealth (Eccl. 5:19). And, it appears to be unfair to us in how He breaks it down and to whom He gives it. The fact is that some people are born into better situations than others. Our past does affect our current situation and our future. There is a component of luck in success. So often we can get caught up in the idea that “I am more talented, but he had all the breaks.”

What God is saying by putting this first is that it is under His providence that He has given much to some and little to others (Matthew 25:14-30). He will be the arbitrator of how well a person uses the resources that He provided and it is not up to us (Luke 12:48). We must look to our affairs and our own lives (I Thessalonians 4:11).

Do not covet your neighbor’s wife – This seems out of place because God has already said not to commit adultery. Jesus says that “You have heard it said, ‘Do not commit adultery’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matt. 5:27-28). Our traditional interpretation that in one command God sets one boundary, and then in another, later commandment He moves that boundary, doesn’t make sense in light of what Jesus was saying. If that were true, then Jesus wouldn’t have had to redefine the interpretation of the commandment. Why this command then?

The principle I see here is that we shouldn’t ***desire the completeness*** of our neighbor.

Under Jewish mindset, a wife completes a man. She is his complement, his helpmeet. Since each man is different, the needs he has in a wife are different. God is the one who provides the wife that a man needs (Proverbs 19:14). When an individual desires another man’s wife, he desires that which God has specifically ordained for another man. He is saying that he is like the other man: He has the other man’s strengths, his weaknesses. He is abdicating his uniqueness as an individual. He is saying that he doesn’t trust God to give him the best mate for him.

It’s easy to look longingly at another marital relationship and say, “I wish my wife were like XXXXXX and would do YYYYYY for me.” This is different from lust or adultery in that the sexual component is missing. The fact is, though, is there

are always tradeoffs. We tend to focus on the weaknesses of our partner and the apparent strengths of another's partner.

In Ex. 20, "house" is listed first and "wife" is listed second. In Deut. 5, they are switched. Why do you think these two switch places after 40 years in the desert?

Do not covet your neighbor's servants-

The principle that I see is that we shouldn't **desire the commitments** of our neighbor. Because of their recent captivity as slaves to the cruelty of the Egyptians, the Israelites redefined the concept of slavery (making it a far cry from the general notion of slavery throughout human history) and placed much obligation on the master. The Jewish people experienced first-hand what it meant being a nation of slaves to Pharaoh. And they are sensitive not to inflict the harsh labor of Egypt onto a servant in their care.

Because all men are owned by God and servants of Him alone, no ownership rights exist in the Jewish concept of slavery. No Jew can subjugate himself to a human master. The circumstances of his enslavement can only ever be temporary; it is never a permanent state. He was not born to serve man, but God. Typically, a Jewish servant works for six years and goes free in the seventh. And even if he voluntarily remains enslaved thereafter, he nevertheless goes free in the year of Jubilee.

While in the capacity of a servant, his master cannot demean him in any way whatsoever. His dignity must be protected at each and every occasion. The Jewish servant cannot be ordered to perform tasks that are unnecessary except to keep him gainfully employed. Nor can he aggrieve him.

A Jewish master can never forget that the servant is, in actual fact, his brother. The Jewish servant has met upon unfortunate circumstances in the ever turning wheel of fortune. And this is an opportunity to bestow kindness upon his brethren. But the master should not ever think that he is superior in any respect. On the contrary, there exists parity between Jewish master and Jewish servant. So if there is only one pillow in the house, the Jewish servant gets it.

When we see the benefits of many servants and we desire those benefits, we fail to remember the responsibility that comes along with it. We are selfish and look only to our needs getting met. A business man may have nicer clothes, nicer car, a vacation home, etc..., but he is also responsible for making decisions that not only affect his life, but also the lives of the people he employs. While many American companies that are ran by boards of trustees often act unethically in this regard, most small business owners that I know take this commitment very seriously. They lay awake at night worrying not just about their own well being, but also that of their employees. Before we wish to have his shoes, we need to spend a night pacing the floor weighing a decision he has to make in them.

Do not covet your neighbor's ox or mule – This seems out of place because a sign of wealth in the OT is not usually counted as oxen and donkeys, but the number of sheep. Usually, when Scripture wishes to portray wealth, we see the number of sheep and the amount of gold and silver (Abraham, Lot, Laban, Jacob). Sometimes we see oxen and donkeys (Job). We have traditionally seen this as “do not covet wealth.” But if that were the case, we would expect God to say, “Do not covet your neighbor's gold and silver and his herds.” So, what does God mean by oxen and mules?

The principle that I see is that we shouldn't desire the **capacity of our neighbor**. Donkey and oxen are different than livestock. They are used to work the farm and are not usually consumed. Oxen and donkey are evidence of person's ability to generate wealth.

We can get caught up in comparing our skill set to others. Some people have more energy and internal resources necessary to “succeed” in life. We shouldn't wish to be like somebody else, nor should we wish to make people just like us. Remember, God gives to each according to his ability (Matthew 25:14-30).

The Principle

When we see that in each of these situations that it was from God that people received their blessings and we see that it is from Him that we received ours, then we can start to see that coveting arises out of **dissatisfaction/mistrust** of God's **provisions** for my life. One of the overlying themes I see is that all desires come out of failure to find contentment in the situation, people, and place God has set for me.

We think we know best about what our lives need, so we begin to covet the things we think we need to find happiness and completeness. God's desire is for us to glorify Him and our desire is for us to glorify ourselves. All covetousness comes out of this need. This world values position, power, prestige, and possessions. So, when we seek to be glorified in the eyes of man, we desire the things that will be symbols of those. We seek big offices with fancy titles behind our names. We seek to cavort with big names and fancy people. We seek to own big cars, big houses, and big TVs. Our life becomes a never-ending hunt where we are always chasing after the next level. These are all things that God warns us not to covet.

God values the faithful, hopeful, and loving. If we seek to please God, rather than man, then we will no longer run after the things of this world. We will understand that our treasures are not physical possession, but the residual of the touch of our hands on those around us. We begin to covet time with God at all hours of the day and night (Is. 26:9) and we will seek to know His ways (Ps. 19:10).

How does coveting display itself?

Covetousness displays itself in two ways:

1. The willingness to use of force or fraud to **TAKE** what is owned by somebody else (i.e., **Greed**)
2. The willingness to use force or fraud to **PREVENT** others from acquiring property (i.e., **Envy**)

Envy and Greed are two-sides of the same coin of covetousness and spent by both the wealthy and the poor. The powerful and oppressed both covet. The weak and the strong envy. We can not merely look at person's situation and say, "Because he is wealthy, he is greedy."

It is a heart issue. When you break Commandment 1 (no other gods before me) by letting a desire for anything of this world dwell in your heart, then you will suddenly be able to break the "do not murder", "do not steal", and "do not lie" commandments to achieve your goal.

The Person

All the commandments in some way point to the very nature of God. I see two main things that this commandment teaches us about God.

First, God is Jehovah Jirah, the provider. God takes care of our needs. When we trust His provisions for our life, then we can be content. Contentment is the opposite of covetousness (Matthew 6, Proverbs 30:7-9).

Secondly, and most importantly, the tenth commandment points us to the Person of God as one who is a **Defender** of the **weak**. True and lasting religion is helping the orphaned and widowed (the truly disadvantaged). Coveting leads us to taking advantage of those people. We begin to oppress others for our own gain, our own pleasure. God is one who gives Himself up and sacrifices Himself for others.

Personal Application

1. Learn to be **CONTENT**
Contentment is a learned trait, a discipline (Philippians 4:11, Eccl. 4:4-8). It comes out of an understanding that this Earth and its things are temporary. Wealth is fleeting.
2. Trust in the **PROVISION** of God.
Remember the Garden of Eden we looked at earlier. God had given everything except one tree to Adam and Eve. However, they didn't think that was enough. They thought God was keeping the good stuff from them. If we remember that God loves us and wants to take care of us (He is Jehovah Jireh, after all), we can be satisfied with where he has placed. Much chasing after wealth is a need to feel secure. If I have a 3-6 months worth of expenses in savings...if I have a funded 401k....I will be secure from the troubles of life. This is the wisdom of the world. The wisdom of God is a little different (Matthew 6:28-30, Hebrews 13:5)

3. Do not be **PROUD**.

Invariably, arrogance and pride go hand-in-hand with wealth. It has something to do with the fact that we think we have earned what we have. We fail to see that God has provided it for us (Luke 12:13-21). Time and time again we see that the wealthy are admonished to not be arrogant (I Timothy 6:17-19, James 3:13-18).

4. **SERVE** others. (I Timothy 6:17-19, Acts 20:33)

I think, therein, lies a key to keeping covetousness at bay. Nothing changes your perspective more than to work closely and personally with those who have far less than you. (i.e., foreign mission trips, inner city programs, etc...) If we are encountering those who truly have nothing, we begin to change our own perspective toward property. It's not enough to merely give to others to work on my behalf, keeping my hands clean from the griminess of the poor. I need to be in the "ditches."

It's easy to have a callous attitude toward the "poor" as a group. It is much harder to be callous when you are sitting next to a homeless man on bench listening to his story as he eats a sandwich. It's hard to be insensitive when you are holding a child born in poverty who can barely whimper because she is so malnourished. It's hard to be coldhearted when you are face to face with the reality of a situation.

5. Look to your own **AFFAIRS**

How much of our problems with Envy couldn't be fixed just by minding our own business (I Thessalonians 4:11)

6. Spend time **SEEKING** God.

I think that if we fill our hearts with a desire for God (Is. 26:9), then there will be no room for desires of this world. We will become blind to them. When we are chasing after God, we can not also be chasing after money, power, and personal glory. God says that his words are more precious than gold (Ps. 19:10).