



"A human being has a natural desire to have more of a good thing than he needs."

—Mark Twain

30-Jul-21

Coveting and the Roots of Sin

Watching toddlers play together in a room full of toys can be instructive. For a short while, the children check out the toys strewn about the room, noting the bright colors, touching them, putting them in their mouths, and perhaps even playing with them for a few moments. However, what usually happens is that, before long, all the kids gravitate toward a particular toy that one of them has claimed as his own. The dozens of other toys in the room fade to gray blobs while the toddlers whine and cry and fight over their newly minted Holy Grail of toys.

Sadly, the scenario is not much different among adults. Like babies, we want to own what we think is popular or rare or unattainable. This urge to possess things we value never shuts off. Some learn to play by the rules of private property, gaining the things they desire through ethical and legal means. Others flout the rules and take by any means what their hearts desire.

Wanting to possess things is not wrong; [God](#) built that feature into us. Despite owning everything, God Himself wants something He does not have: children like Him. It is what His whole plan is ultimately all about! He has an earnest desire to give us [peace](#), [joy](#), prosperity, equitable governance, and

many other good things. We can have similar desires for ourselves and our families. In its most basic form, desire is not sinful.

The problem with desire is that, under the influence of human nature inspired by both the selfishness of the flesh and the anti-God hostility of Satan's world, it soon morphs into lust or inordinate desire. This common tendency among human beings provokes God's ban in 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](#); [Deuteronomy 5:21](#)).

God uses the Hebrew word *chmad* (*Strong's* #2530) to express this very human act. *Chmad* means "to desire earnestly" or "to long after," which is in essence what the English word *covet* means: "to desire what belongs to another inordinately or culpably." In this commandment, God forbids setting our desire on something that another person already owns or something we cannot legally acquire. In the commandment itself, He prohibits lusting after another's spouse (one already legally and morally committed to another) or personal belongings. Its final phrase extends His prohibition out to all possessions of others.

Like the ninth commandment, the tenth deliberately invokes community by mentioning "your neighbor's" things three times: his spouse, house, and everything he owns. As in the previous commandment, the wording implies that breaking it undermines and eventually destroys harmony among family, neighbors, and ultimately an entire nation's citizens. Like widespread lying, pervasive [coveting](#) breeds distrust and division.

Because He has already prohibited stealing in the eighth commandment, God intends us to understand His command against coveting focuses on the *internal* attitude—the intense desire to possess a forbidden thing—rather than the physical act of taking it for oneself. It is the unseen, inner wickedness in us that first sows the seed of societal breakdown. This internality of [sin](#) finds an echo in what Jesus teaches in [Mark 7:21-22](#):

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For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man.

The final commandment, then, confirms that God has not just forbidden external acts but that His aim all along has been to curtail the sinful attitudes that spawn the damaging words and actions that divide and destroy marriages, families, communities, and whole nations. In effect, God ends His commandments with the causal element that breaks them all: improper desire.

For this reason, the apostle Paul can write that "covetousness . . . is idolatry" ([Colossians 3:5](#)). When we obsessively desire or lust for a particular thing, we have set it up as an idol. We have placed that object or person higher than our relationship with the true God, breaking the first commandment. Our wrong desire to choose a god of our own making breaks the second. We violate the third commandment when we desire to bear God's name our way instead of the way He instructs us in His Word. We defile the [Sabbath](#) day when we want to use God's time as our own. We can make the same case with each of the remaining commandments, circling back to God's injunction against covetousness, the internal sin that underlies them all.

For instance, back in the mid-90s, we kept the [Feast of Tabernacles](#) in San Antonio, Texas, and one afternoon, we watched the IMAX film about the Alamo. My daughter, who had just started school, made an incisive comment that surprised us. The film showed the Mexican Army attacking the small band of Texans defending the Alamo, and she pointed out that the Mexicans were breaking God's commandments. We thought she would say they broke the sixth commandment against killing, but she said instead that they were killing the Texans because they coveted the Alamo! Her young mind grasped that their covetousness was the cause of the more visible sin of war.

Two of Jesus' [beatitudes](#) present effective foils for covetousness. The first, "Blessed are those who [hunger and thirst after righteousness](#), for they shall be filled" ([Matthew 5:6](#)), provides a righteous, legitimate desire to replace the evil desires the human heart usually pursues. If we spend our time both

desiring and seeking the right ways of living before God in [this world](#), we will displace the inordinate desires that steer us off the path toward the [Kingdom of God](#). We need to have a similar zeal in yearning for godly things that we once had in coveting the things belonging to others. And as He promises, these godly desires will fill our needs abundantly.

The second of these beatitudes, "Blessed are the [pure in heart](#), for they shall [see God](#)" ([Matthew 5:8](#)), provides the goal we must shoot for. Our covetous hearts, green with envy and black with lust, must be purified—cleansed and polished to reflect the pure nature of God. He justifies us and forgives our past sins, but we have a part to play in our purification, as the apostle John relates in [I John 3:3](#): "And everyone who has this hope in Him [to see Christ as He is in the [first resurrection](#)] *purifies himself*, just as He is pure" (emphasis ours). In the sanctification process, God works with us to purify our hearts ([Philippians 2:12-13](#)) to prepare us for living eternally as He does. Not only will we literally see God at its culmination, but we will truly understand God—comprehend Him—as our hearts mirror His own.

As He closes the commandments, God gets to the heart of the matter: Sin starts inside, in the mind, the heart, with iniquitous desires, and that is where we must begin to change our natures into the image of [Jesus Christ](#) ([Ephesians 4:23-24](#); [Colossians 3:10](#)).

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[The Tenth Commandment](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh (1932-2023)

Coveting begins as a desire emanating from both without and within. The breaking of every other commandment emanates from the breaking of this commandment. Our nation's current economic woes derive from widespread covetousness and greed motivated by advertising urging us to conform and keep up with the Joneses, hedonistically living the luxurious good life. Credit, over the long run, slows down business. Accumulated interest (usury)

makes it increasingly impossible to pay back the principal. Because of corruption, greed, and covetousness, modern Israel has made itself the economic slaves of Gentile nations. Following our conversion, we must mortify the old man and put on the new man, following the example of our Elder Brother Jesus Christ, walking in love in selfless concern for others. We must be willing to face some realities: human nature cannot be satisfied, nothing physical can satisfy covetousness, and joy does not derive from materialism. We must seek God first through studying, praying, meditating, and fasting. In our prayers we must concentrate on interceding for others and praising God. We need to adopt true values about what we think about ourselves and other, living soberly, righteously and godly, allowing God's grace to polish our character, knowing that right thoughts produce right conduct.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Whatever Your Heart Desires](#)

by Staff

The Bible tells us that at the Feast of Tabernacles, we can spend our money on whatever we desire. However, the Feast is a test of our hearts. What do we really desire? Do we indulge ourselves, or do we use our resources to make it the best Feast ever for others?

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