

The Tenth Commandment

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In 1977, my wife and I attended a "Positive Thinking Rally" in Charlotte, North Carolina, that featured such famous motivational speakers as Paul Harvey, Art Linkletter, Robert Schuler, Ira Hayes, and the man considered by many as the granddaddy of them all, Earl Nightingale.

After one or two speakers, it became apparent that the "get" principle was being impressed on the forefront of people's minds. Even though some speakers suggested that the reason for great profits was to be able to share more, they made financial success an end in itself. Always lurking in the background of their presentations was to get success by taking advantage of human nature and of people's desire to conform, to keep up with the Joneses, or simply to have more and better attractive things. Yet, one of the speakers, Ira Hayes, showed clearly that a major key to success in business is not to worry about conforming to one's competition but being distinctively different.

Marketers have thoroughly studied human nature's desire to conform so that they will be considered to be at the same level as everyone else in a social status they admire. This desire is stimulated by constant urgings from marketers to buy what everybody else—obviously—already has, so that one does not seem "backward," unsophisticated, a nerd in their peers' eyes. In the face of this societal pressure, not to compete for the same material things the neighbor already has makes a person appear to be unambitious and odd.

Sometimes it seems to be a paradox, a contradiction, that God says He wishes above all things that we prosper and be in good health, and that many of God's servants, especially in the Old Testament, have been wealthy; yet He also tells us that it is better to give than to receive and that the accumulation of things is not to be a major goal. Overall, God teaches that the things prosperity makes it possible for a person to have are a means to an end and not the end in themselves. He teaches us that "one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses" (Luke 12:15). Others may make it life's goal to have them, but we must not.

The tenth commandment in Deuteronomy 5:21 reads, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife; and you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field, his manservant, his ox, his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's." *Covet* means "to desire" or "to take delight in beyond God's acceptable bounds." It indicates "to long after a property that belongs to another in order to enjoy it." It is covetousness to allow oneself to indulge in thoughts that lead to actions named in the other nine commandments. They are grasping thoughts that lead to grasping deeds.

Coveting normally arises from two sources. It often begins with a perception of beauty in a thing desirable to possess. It also arises from a persistent inclination for something more abstract like a desire for power. The first is generally stimulated from without, the second generally from within. Both are equally bad.

One commentator stated that he believed all public crime would cease if just this one law were kept. Another said that every sin against one's neighbor, whether of word or deed, springs from the

breaking of this commandment. James 1:14-15 seems to agree: "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death."

To the Heart of the Matter

In the Exodus 20:17 version of the commandment, the word "house" implies household. Subsequently, six other items are listed so that we clearly understand that "household" is meant. In Deuteronomy 5, "wife" is moved to first position as the very crown of one's possessions, and "field" is inserted because earlier, when God gave the Exodus version, fields were of no concern to pilgrims who possessed no land. Thus, between the two wordings God provides a seven-fold safeguard of other people's interests, revealing the underlying concept of outgoing concern.

In this commandment, we step from the outer world of word and deed into the secret place where all good and evil begins: the heart. The inner life actually determines a person's destiny, as the desires of a person's life are held and nurtured there.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:27-28: "You have heard it said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.'" The Greek word translated as "looks" implies intent or special contemplation. The word underneath "lust" means "to set one's heart upon" or "to long for." Taken together, they make Jesus' instruction obvious.

Evidence from other portions of God's Word shows that it is not wrong to desire a husband or wife lawfully, but it is most definitely wrong when the one desired is legitimately beyond the reach of the admirer. How often does such admiration merge into a desire to possess and thus break the commandment? Considering the national statistics on divorce, this must happen frequently.

Jesus continues in Matthew 5:29-30:

And if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

The Jews of Jesus' time perceived adultery as a kind of theft. This is not entirely wrong, but in this context, Jesus' emphasis is on moral purity: Ruin awaits those who are unchaste, even in thought.

Perhaps nowhere in Scripture is the inwardness of Christ's teaching as evident as with this commandment—inward in the sense that within is where sin begins and also where change must take place. It identifies where the problem resides. Christ carries impurity back beyond the lustful act to the first touch of the hands to the look of the eyes—and beyond these, to the first inception of desire. The Christian must "amputate" the desire so that the sin never becomes an act. We will remain pure and so will the object of our desire.

God gave us the wonderful gift of imagination, but if fed dirt by the eye, the imagination will be filthy. Sin begins with our allowing the imagination to dwell on what it should not. What feeds the imagination is so very important to moral purity and thinking and therefore to sin. Philippians 4:8 provides excellent insight:

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

The advice is clear: We must stop feeding our imagination dirt. We have to deal radically with sin! The purpose of this discipline is enrichment of life. The person who is condemned here is the one who deliberately uses his eyes and mind to awaken his lust so that desire is stimulated.

It is hard enough to avoid lusting after natural things, but this world deliberately designs many things to spark wrong desires in us. If certain books, pictures, magazines, places, activities, or people cause temptation, they must be avoided regardless of the cost. Avoiding sin is that important!

It Is Deliberately Pumped Into Us

We need to see where we stand. Since the turn of the twentieth century, life has sped up. We are constantly urged to rush to make more money, to have more things, and to have a good time. We are even encouraged to hurry to have more time so that we can get everything out of life. On every side, we are taught to compete with our neighbors for honors or material advancement. We are stimulated through advertising to crave luxuries that were unknown a generation ago. So often, the marketers who persuade us are promoting an image through verbal gimmicks such as "You owe it to yourself!"; "Wouldn't you rather have a Buick?"; "Move up to Chrysler!"; and "You deserve a break today!"

Earl Nightingale stated in his lecture, "The Protestant work ethic has been so successful, it has spawned advertising and monthly payments in order to consume what it produces." The Protestant churches as a whole approached the Bible in a manner different from the Catholic Church. Seeing principles of material success in it, they openly proclaimed them from their pulpits. However, people did not grasp the whole picture of what the Bible actually teaches, but what they did understand produced the society we have been born into and caught up in.

God says in Jeremiah 5:1, "Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem; see now and know; and seek in her open places if you can find a man, if there is anyone who executes judgment, who seeks the truth, and I will pardon her." This begins a passage in which the prophet is dispatched to find a righteous person in the city. Jeremiah 6:10-11, 13-15 reveals the dismal results of his search:

"To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Indeed their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot give heed. Behold the word of the Lord is a reproach to them; therefore I am full of the fury of the Lord. I am weary of holding it in. I will pour it out on the children outside, and on the assembly of young men together; for even the husband shall be taken with the wife, the aged with him who is full of days. . . . Because from the least of them even to the greatest of them, everyone is given to covetousness; and from the prophet even to the priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the hurt of My people saying, 'Peace, peace!' When there is no peace. Were they ashamed

when they had committed abomination? No! They were not at all ashamed; nor did they know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time I punish them, they shall be cast down," says the Lord.

God indicts the entire nation for its covetousness. A major reason why coveting is so dangerous is shown by our credit system, which is based on the premise of possessing something before one is actually able to afford it.

In this profit-producing scheme, advertising is credit's companion. The marketer's purpose is to speed up the business, possession, and profit cycle. However, in reality over the long haul, credit actually slows things down and makes items more expensive because the credit must be paid for through interest in addition to the item's original price. It also creates greater debt, enslaving the debtor to the creditor. This same principle is at work in every other unlawful act of which coveting is a part.

Who will listen to this reality? Through America's almost insanely massive and ever-growing indebtedness, God is demonstrating that people simply will not heed either sound human or divine advice because their minds are driven by whatever they desire to have right now. It has a grip on the heart so strong that nothing yet has been able to break it.

This tenacious hold is why tithing comes as such a shock when people learn that God requires it. Many are living way over their heads. When they learn of tithing, the penalty for earlier stealing from God greatly influences current spending. They must then learn to pay in adversity, sacrificing as they go on in obedience.

The Essence of Covetousness

Isaiah 56:10-12 says:

His watchmen are blind, they are all ignorant; they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber. Yes, they are greedy dogs which never have enough. And they are shepherds who cannot understand; they all look to their own way, every one for his own gain, from his own territory. "Come," one says, "I will bring wine, and we will fill ourselves with intoxicating drink; tomorrow will be as today, and much more abundant."

Does this nation not sound like America? In verse 9, God calls for the nations to devour His people. Its leaders are blind to the nation's real needs because they are thinking of their lusts instead of speaking out and acting on issues of morality. They blindly plunge on, proclaiming that it will be better tomorrow!

Colossians 3:5 counsels us, "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth; fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." The Greek word underlying "covetousness" is *pleonexia*, which means "the desire to have more." This is among the ugliest of sins because it involves idolatry as well as its effects on others. The Greeks defined it as "the insatiable desire to have what rightfully belongs to others." It is further described as "ruthless self-seeking," the kind of attitude that the arrogant and callous person has, assuming that others and their things exist for his own benefit.

The desire for more money can lead to theft; the desire for more prestige, to evil ambition; the desire for more power, to tyranny; the desire for a person's body, to fornication and adultery. Paul identifies covetousness as idolatry because, in the place of God, it puts self-interest for illicit things. A man sets up an idol in his heart because he desires to get something from it. So he serves it to get that something rather than to obey God's commandment. That, very simply put, is idolatry.

The essence of idolatry is to get for the self in defiance of God. However, we have to give ourselves to God if we want to overcome illicit desires. Paul says to "mortify" (KJV) or "put to death" (NKJV) whatever is sinful. That does not mean to practice ascetic self-discipline—it means to kill. The Christian must kill self-centeredness. In his life, he must make a radical transformation, a shift of the center of his life. It is the same principle as described earlier by Matthew 5:29. Everything that keeps a person from fully obeying God and surrendering to Jesus Christ must be surgically excised from his conduct. The tenth commandment, then, has a function similar to the first. They both act as governors, controlling whether we keep the others.

James 1:13-15 reveals a fundamental truth:

Let no man say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

This pattern of producing sin began in the Garden of Eden when Satan tempted Adam and Eve by stimulating their desire for the forbidden fruit. From that small beginning, sin entered and blossomed. It is easily seen that every problem produced by immorality, whether individual or national, is caused by allowing temptation to develop into sin. Sin is illicit desire brought to fruition, and everybody from peasant to king is subject to wrong desires.

From the beginning of time, it seems to have been a human instinct to blame others for our sins, just as Adam and Eve did in the Garden. James sternly rebukes that view. God does not cause sin and neither do things. Sin would be helpless if there were nothing in man to which it could appeal. Sin's appeal is to human nature's self-centeredness, which then builds through our desires. If a man desires long enough and intensely enough, the consequence—action—is inevitable.

It is because we desire our own way that we dishonor our parents and murder; because we desire a thing, we steal; because we desire being well thought of, we lie. Illicit desire can be nourished, stifled, or by the grace of God, eliminated. If one gives himself to Christ by submitting entirely to God, there is little or no time or place left for evil desire.

The tenth commandment pierces through surface Christianity, truly revealing whether a person has surrendered his will to God or not. The spiritual requirements for keeping this commandment are in some ways more rigid than any other because they pierce right through to the thoughts.

Where Is Its Generator?

Jesus teaches in Mark 4:19, "The cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires [lusts, *KJV*] for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful." A simple

illustration helps understand this statement: A desire-driven "window shopping" for things to do in order to be "busy"—filling our time with meaningless, self-centered, carnal activities—crowds out God's Word. When we elect to do this, we risk many spiritual dangers.

When we covet carnal activities or material things, we serve them. If we give our time, energy, and money to them to the extent that we leave only the barest minimum of those things for God, we are practicing idolatry. It may reveal itself in us through a fear that, if we give ourselves to God, we will have nothing for ourselves. We live as if life in God cannot be full enough to make up for the loss of other things.

Isaiah 2:6-9 vividly describes a people busy pleasing themselves:

For You have forsaken Your people, the house of Jacob, because they are filled with eastern ways; they are soothsayers like the Philistines, and they are pleased with the children of foreigners. Their land is also full of silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures; their land is also full of horses, and there is no end to their chariots. Their land is also full of idols; they worship the work of their own hands, that which their own fingers have made. People bow down, and each man humbles himself [before his idol]; therefore do not forgive them.

Portrayed here is an entire nation devoted to getting, much like our modern world. The American motto seems to be, "The chief end of man is to glorify prosperity and enjoy it forever." We worship—we serve—what we make. Another facet of this is that potential fruits of material success are self-confidence and pride, which to the successful mind subtly makes God unnecessary. But since all men must have a god, and a righteous God asks awkward questions as to how the success was attained, such people turn to a more amenable god. They worship their own success, secularism, the confidence of men in their own powers. The quest for material wealth thus produces a powerful need to assimilate to the world.

Jesus, in Mark 7:20-23, provides clear insight as to the location of the generator of man's drive to possess:

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

Notice especially what He lists first, as it is the generator that leads to the other sins. His instruction thus also points out where the other sins can be stopped. A person's evil thoughts do not exist because of brainlessness, but because of confusion of values and lack of concern for godly spiritual truth, leading to careless, shoddy moral choices.

Paul adds in Romans 7:7: "What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet.'" Some of God's laws are self-evident even to the natural mind, but only God can tell us that it is *absolutely* wrong to lust. By contrast, at the Positive Thinking Rally, a major theme was "You can have whatever you want, if you only make the effort."

This commandment, then, deals with attitude and motivation. Even if an individual secretly rejects God's standard and way in his heart and lusts after something he cannot or will not lawfully possess or do, then eventually, this mental rebellion will break out in sin. Action will manifest what the mind has been doing all along.

Hebrews 4:12-13 reveals a searching principle:

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.

Commentator William Barclay renders the beginning of verse 12 as, "For the word of God is instinct with life." For the Christian, what God says is always an issue; it is always essential to process any given circumstance through it. However, by way of a vivid contrast, in terms of importance other writings easily slide into the background of one's thought on their way to oblivion. God's Word, though, is a penetrating critic scrutinizing a person's desires and intentions. It can make him feel naked before it and compelled to take action in the right direction—almost as though he has a knife at his throat.

By Its Fruit

How can a person identify whether he is lusting? By the fruit he is producing through his desire. The apostle writes in I Timothy 6:10, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows." A fruit of coveting is a hungering unhappiness in not possessing what is desired. The puppy-love syndrome, which exhibits the "I can't live without him/her/it" reaction is a form of this longing. In more serious circumstances, coveting will cause far more severe consequences, the fruits of intense sorrow, pain, and remorse.

Israel's King Ahab intensely desired a vineyard abutting his own lands, but the vineyard was owned by his neighbor, Naboth. Ahab attempted to purchase the land, but Naboth rejected his proposal strongly and on firm family and legal grounds. Notice how the Bible records Ahab's reaction to the rejection he suffered:

So Ahab went into his house sullen and displeased because of the word which Naboth the Jezreelite had spoken to him; for he had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers." And he lay down on his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no food. (I Kings 21:4)

These are the fruits his coveting produced. II Samuel 13:1-2 provides us with another vivid example:

Now after this it was so that Absalom the son of David had a lovely sister, whose name was Tamar; and Amnon the son of David loved her. Amnon was so distressed over his sister Tamar that he became sick; for she was a virgin. And it was improper for Amnon to do anything to her.

He did not love her; he was lusting after her. Notice the initial fruit—distress! The story continues, eventually revealing that his lust produced rape. It did not end there but produced more evil fruit: "Then Amnon hated her exceedingly, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, 'Arise, be gone!'" (verse 15). So much for lust producing good fruit! How many teen and/or young adult lives have been severely damaged by unwed pregnancy resulting from coveting?

James 4:1-3 says:

Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

War is not a happy situation, but one that produces sorrow. God, in this brief context, ties war directly to lust. War produces terror, pain, destruction, and heartache, not peace. Divorce follows war in the family, most assuredly a very sorrowful situation. Even in the narrow confines of a family war, lust and its resulting anguish and despondency are tied directly to the motivations for the family breakup.

Conversely, Proverbs 10:22 provides us with a succinct reminder and promise: "The blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it."

What Can We Do?

We are not helpless against the evil desires of our human nature. We can do several things:

1. *Recognize that human beings have an unstable, insatiable nature.* Ecclesiastes 1:8 says, "All things are full of labor; man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing." Being aware of this biblical truth can give us a better grasp of what we are dealing with. Do not be deceived; happiness is a fruit of true spirituality. God has not put the power into anything material to satisfy man's spiritual needs.

2. *Seek God first.* Our Savior advises in Luke 12:15, 31: "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses. . . . But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you." Paul adds in Colossians 3:1-2: "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth."

We must purposely and deliberately study, pray, fast, and meditate. Further, we must consciously practice God's way of life. This takes sacrifice and discipline, but it fills the mind with the kind of thoughts that will eventually make it impossible to sin.

3. *Hate covetousness, not things.* Proverbs 28:15-16 states, "Like a roaring lion and a charging bear is a wicked ruler over poor people. A ruler who lacks understanding is a great oppressor, but he who hates covetousness will prolong his days."

It is very helpful to observe what covetousness produces. Some sins are clearly understood, but covetousness is generally less easily observed, requiring careful attention to comprehend the very

beginning of many sins. Making such observations is helpful in evaluating the self. We need to remember that coveting violates the basic principle of God's way of outgoing concern. It also keeps us from listening to God, so we must be attuned to detect its presence.

4. *Learn to be cheerfully generous.* Luke records Paul saying in Acts 20:35, "I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" The apostle adds to this thought in II Corinthians 9:6-7: "But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver."

We need to keep in mind that we have such an abundance of self-concern mixed with a natural fear that, if we give things away, we will not have enough. God intends that we overcome these fears. Self-centeredness must be excised from our character. Working on it is an excellent discipline.

5. *Learn thoroughly what grace teaches.* Titus 2:11-14 tells us what this is:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.

Isaiah 1:16-17 adds, "Cease to do evil, learn to do good."

Jesus Christ has redeemed us from the power that motivates us to sin. He gives His power to those who strive to overcome the remnants of their old nature. Certainly, it is a tough and in many cases a long process, but with God's help, if we make the efforts, we can overcome it.

The dynamic of this new life is the coming of Jesus Christ first to us by His Spirit and then to this earth to rule it. When royalty is coming, everything is made spit-and-polish clean and decorated for the royal eyes to see. That is what we are doing: The Christian is one who is steadfastly making himself ready for the arrival of his King.

To this end, let us strive consistently and mightily to think the right thoughts that produce right conduct.