

The Tenth Commandment (1998)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

***Forerunner*, "Personal," January 1998**

In 1977 my wife and I attended a "Positive Thinking Rally" in Charlotte, North Carolina, that boasted such motivational speakers as Paul Harvey, Art Linkletter, Robert Schuller, Ira Hayes, and the forerunner of them all, Earl Nightingale. After hearing several presentations, it became apparent that the "get" principle played a large part in the concepts they were inviting us to incorporate into our program for success. Although some speakers mentioned giving as another avenue for success, the reason for giving was the rewards that accrue from it.

These people sold "success" as an end in itself. Frequently lurking within their presentations was the idea of achieving success by taking advantage of human nature. Everyone, they said, desires to conform, to keep up with the Joneses, to be the first to own something, to be thought of as "somebody," to pamper themselves or simply to own attractive things.

People, especially those who stand to make a profit, take advantage of human nature's desires. Using various psychological ploys, they persuade the public to buy products that seemingly everybody else already has. They want their targets to feel backward and unsophisticated if they do not compete and lust for the same material things and status as their neighbors.

Sometimes it seems a paradox, a contradiction, that God says He desires above all things that we prosper and be in health (III John 2), yet "one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses" (Luke 12:15). Many of God's Old Testament servants were quite wealthy, but He tells us not to lay up treasures on earth (Matthew 6:19). He allows this world to produce a glittering array of desirable items, but He says it is better to give than receive (Acts 20:35).

God commands in Exodus 20:17, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's." Here, "house" is the equivalent of household. God lists the remaining items so we clearly understand what He means by "house." In Deuteronomy 5:21, "wife"—or "spouse," since a woman can covet too—is moved to first position as the very crown of one's possessions, and "field" is included as the Israelites were soon to settle in the Promised Land.

One Bible commentator said all public crime would cease if this one law was kept. Another said every sin against one's neighbor springs from the breaking of this commandment, whether of word or deed. Between the two wordings in Exodus and Deuteronomy, a sevenfold guarding of another's interests shows the underlying concept of outgoing concern. In this command we step from the outer world of word and deed into the secret place where all good and evil begins, the heart (Matthew 15: 18-19). This inner man determines a person's destiny.

Like the ninth commandment, which parallels the third, the tenth commandment parallels the first. Next to the first commandment, the tenth may be the most important of all. Commentator Robert I. Kahn writes:

The first commandment deals with foundations; the last with motivations. The first deals with the Rock of ages; the last with the surging tides of desire. The first is an affirmation

of the divine source of morality; the last deals with the well-springs of immorality. The first implies that right thought will lead to right action; the last reminds us that wrong ideas will lead to wrong action.

The last commandment is unique among the ten, and its position in last place is surely no accident. While the others concern actions, this one deals with attitudes. The others prohibit external deeds while this one focuses on internal thoughts. Like an x-ray aimed on the mind, it seeks to curb the restless, greedy, avaricious, jealous and envious fountain of the human heart. It gets my vote as the most difficult to keep, since breaking it is the most widespread of humanity's moral faults.

What Is Coveting?

To covet is to long after another's property to enjoy it as one's own. It is indulging in thoughts that lead to actions named in the other commandments. Grasping thoughts lead to grasping deeds.

Coveting normally arises from two sources. First, it begins with a perception of beauty; we desire to possess a thing because it looks good to us. Second, it comes from an inclination for something more abstract, like a desire for power. The first almost always arises externally because the attraction comes through the senses. The second generally arises internally through dwelling upon how the abstract possession will better the self. Both are equally bad.

We can see how this works using adultery as an example. Jesus says in Matthew 5:27-28, "You have heard that it was 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."

God's Word obviously shows that not every desire is wrong. For instance, Solomon writes:

Get wisdom! Get understanding! Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will preserve you; love her, and she will keep you. Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding. Exalt her, and she will promote you; she will bring you honor, when you embrace her. She will place on your head an ornament of grace; a crown of glory she will deliver to you. (Proverbs 4:5-9)

It is no sin to desire knowledge, understanding and wisdom. God's law is "more to be desired . . . than much fine gold" (Psalm 19:10). It is not wrong to desire a godly spouse. Learning is valuable, and desiring godly character is good. Others have good qualities that we might well desire for ourselves.

The word translated "lust" in Matthew 5:28 means "to set one's heart upon." But when the object desired is legitimately beyond the reach of the admirer, when admiration becomes a desire to get, one breaks the commandment. Desire of and by itself is not wrong, but desiring what belongs to another to such a degree that it dominates our thinking and motivates us to take other unlawful actions to possess the object is sin. Such covetousness often suppresses the far more important things of God—and may even cause one to forget them altogether.

When desire builds to the breaking point, people will lie, steal, commit adultery, dishonor parents and even murder to have what they lust after. We might also break the Sabbath and destroy our witness for God by serving our desires. Truly, Paul was correct in Colossians 3:5: "Therefore put to

death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." Breaking the tenth commandment brings us full circle through the commandments and back to the first.

Normal Desires Versus Coveting

There is nothing wrong, however, in merely wanting something. It is only wrong to want something so badly that we would break every law to get it, be sick with unhappiness without it or so occupied with it that we push God out of our lives. To desire a better life does not break the command; to enter the race to keep up with the Joneses does. To want our children to have it better than we did is natural; it becomes evil only when its purpose distorts the child's values.

To love pretty things is normal. God loves beauty and has created it. We can appreciate beautiful things, but to desire them to show them off and arouse envy in others is evil. It is not wrong to desire the needs of life and even its luxuries, but a feverish passion for more—and the action it incites—breaches God's law.

There are two very good reasons why it is sin to covet: Coveting can cause crime against others, and it is a very real crime against the self.

The Jews felt that adultery is a kind of theft. Though this is not entirely wrong, Jesus emphasizes its impurity in Matthew 5:27-28. He says that ruin awaits even the unchaste in thought. Nowhere is the inward aim of Christ's teaching so evident as in this comment. A change must first take place in the thoughts if conduct is going to be changed. The real problem with sin resides inside the mind. Christ traces impurity back beyond the lustful act, beyond the first touch of the hands, beyond the gaze of the eyes, to the inception of desire.

The Bible gives several examples of evil desire leading to more sin:

- » Achan desired silver, gold and a beautiful Babylonian garment, and he stole them despite knowing that they had been devoted to the Lord. Not only was he killed as a result of his coveting, but his sons, daughters, oxen, asses and sheep also died. Even his tent was buried along with them (Joshua 7:18-26)! It also led to the death of 36 Israelite soldiers at Ai (verses 1-5).
- » Abimelech desired the prestige of the throne, and he murdered seventy times to get it (Judges 9:1-5).
- » David desired Bathsheba, leading him to commit adultery and then murder (II Samuel 11:1-27).
- » Ahab desired the vineyard of Naboth, and it led him and Jezebel to compound that sin by lying, then taking God's name in vain and murder (I Kings 21:1-19).

Predatory thought leads to predatory action. The evidence is clear: Breaking this commandment sets off a chain reaction that consumes others and the self before its effect dissipates.

We must amputate the desire so the sin will never become an act, and then we will remain pure, as will the object of our desire. Imagination is a wonderful gift from God, but if fed dirt by the eye, the imagination can easily become impure.

The person condemned by Jesus in Matthew 5:27-28 deliberately uses his eyes to awaken and stimulate his lust. It is difficult enough to avoid lusting after natural things, but many things in this world are deliberately designed to awaken wrong desires. If certain books, pictures, magazines, movies, places, activities or people tempt us to lust, we must avoid them, regardless of the cost. Not sinning is that important!

What feeds the imagination is important to our purity. Philippians 4:8 states with resounding clarity:

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.

This is why Jesus followed up His statement regarding lust with Matthew 5:29-30:

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.

We must stop feeding our imagination dirt. We must deal radically with sin! We need this discipline to enter God's Kingdom by the "strait gate" to enrich our lives for all eternity, leaving behind the momentary satisfaction of our natural but puerile desires!

Even when coveting falls short of directly breaking another commandment, it can damage both persons and principles. When a person covets what is another's, even though he may not actually lift a hand to take it, he robs virtue of its real meaning and makes obedience a hollow, mechanical activity. Any wife who has caught her husband gazing lustfully on another woman knows what this means. It kills trust in the relationship. At such a point, lust is already destroying.

Gossip and Greed

Coveting plays a part in gossip. Why would one even gossip except to elevate himself and at the same time put another down? Gossip is the front for a hidden lust for superiority.

We all know how miserable greed can make a person. Proverbs 30:15-16 says:

The leech has two daughters, crying, "Give! Give!" There are three things that are never satisfied, four things never say, "It is enough!": the grave, the barren womb, the earth that is not satisfied with water, and the fire that never says, "It is enough!"

Each of these illustrates what greed does to the life of a person suffering from impossible-to-be-fulfilled desires. The ache and the yearning never cease, and the restless pursuit goes on, resulting in unhappiness.

A fable involving a greedy fox and a luscious vineyard of grapes helps to show greed's entrapment. The fox so wanted the grapes that his mouth watered just to look at them. Indeed, his whole life focused on sating his hunger for them. So he walked round and round the vineyard wall looking for a way in. Finally, his dogged search was rewarded when he spied a hole under some brush at the base of the wall. The hole, though, was just small enough that he could not squeeze through.

But the fox really wanted those grapes! So he fasted for three days until he was lean enough to wriggle through. Joyously, he ate grapes until he could eat no more. Gorged with success, he set out to leave the vineyard, but he was now too fat to crawl through the hole! He had to fast again until he was lean enough to leave. Poor fox, he was caught in the endless cycle of greed!

We all have at least a bit of this in us. Some eat as though food were going out of style. Some spend money as though, if we kept it, it would wear out our pockets. Instead we end up having to deal with a mountainous credit card debt and with it virtual slavery to a bank or finance company.

A Russian story, *How Much Land Does a Man Need?*, tells of Russian peasants who were offered all the virgin land they could walk around in a day. One man set out to gorge himself on land. He did not walk, he trotted. At noon, when he should have been turning back, he increased his speed to a run because he saw a piece of timberland ahead that he felt he needed badly. About three o'clock, he finally turned back. Now he had to step up his pace even faster because part of the bargain was that he must be back at the starting point at sunset. As the sun began to sink, he put on a final burst of speed, and just as he reached his goal, he fell dead. So they gave him all the land a man needs—six feet of it!

How that story agrees with what Paul writes in I Timothy 6:6-10!

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. 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.

These verses show how we can know—if we are honest with ourselves—when we are coveting: by the fruit produced! Lust "drown[s] men in destruction and perdition" and "pierces one through with many sorrows." When we want something so badly we are not happy without it, we are coveting. Coveting's emotional effect is sorrow, pain, remorse, guilt, restlessness and dissatisfaction.

Desire Run Amok

II Samuel 13:1-15 tells the story of the lust-driven affair of Amnon, one of David's sons, and Tamar, one of David's daughters, a half-sister of Amnon. Amnon was sick with love for Tamar, but the fruit of the relationship shows it was not love, but lust. He greatly desired to take her to bed, so much so that he deceitfully conspired with his cousin Jonadab to arrange matters. He then compounded that

sin by lying to his father to be alone with her and raping her when he finally was. The fruit of his shameful deed was further defiled when his feelings for her reversed to a hatred against her that was greater than his former "love." Two years later Amnon was dead at the hand of Absalom, Tamar's full brother.

What piling of sin on sin coveting produced! It destroyed Tamar's virginity and possibly a future marriage. It destroyed the cohesiveness of David's family. It produced burning hatred, and everyone felt great sorrow. All of this blossomed from an uncontrolled desire in the mind of one person. Its effects impacted on David's family for many generations.

James gives another illustration of the effects of desire run amok in James 4:1-3:

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.

When we think of nations at war, do we also think of what a happy situation it is that people are being killed, families separated, property destroyed or confiscated, hopes and dreams shattered and futures ended? War produces terror, fear, pain, anger, uncertainty, guilt and—if it could be weighed—tons of heartache. War, God's Word informs us, is a fruit of coveting.

Apply these thoughts to a microcosm of national wars, family wars, that so often end in divorce. What causes these family wars? They frequently erupt for the same basic reason as national wars. Somebody is coveting, and though the scale is smaller, the results are the same.

The Protestant Work Ethic

At the "Positive Thinking Rally" I attended, Earl Nightingale stated, "The Protestant work ethic has been so successful, it has spawned advertising and monthly payments in order to consume what it produces." And it is the *Protestant* work ethic. Protestants approach the Bible differently than Catholics. They see in it principles of material success and openly proclaim them from their pulpits. But the people do not get a balanced picture, which is responsible for producing much of what we have been born into and caught up in.

Jeremiah 6 is part of an indictment against the sinfulness of Israel and a prophecy about what God is going to do in response.

Thus says the Lord of hosts: "They shall thoroughly glean as a vine the remnant of Israel; as a grape-gatherer, put your hand back into the branches." 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; they have no delight in it. 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. And their houses shall be turned over to others, fields and wives together; for I will stretch out My hand against the inhabitants of the land," says the Lord. "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." (Jeremiah 6:9-13)

Notice also Isaiah 56:9-12:

All you beasts of the field, come to devour, all you beasts in the forest. 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, everyone 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."

Do these two prophecies describe America? "Everyone is given to covetousness," "greedy dogs which never have enough." A Protestant saying is that "the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." An anonymous wit paralleled this, saying the U.S. motto should be, "The chief end of man is to glorify prosperity and enjoy it forever." A European observer wrote that "desire is enthroned in the mind of the American consumer." We are immersed in a constant barrage of advertisement. Our whole economy works to stimulate our desire for food, clothing, automobiles, furniture, jewelry and travel, filling our minds with the "gimmies." It is difficult to resist unless our focus is disciplined toward going in the right direction.

Because of these sins, God calls upon the nations to devour His people. The leaders are just as blind to the nation's real needs because, instead of speaking out and acting upon moral issues, they are embroiled in their own lusts. While America sinks into the quicksand of that way of life, they proclaim an even better and brighter tomorrow!

Another reason why coveting has the power to destroy the coveter is revealed in the credit purchasing system that dominates the American economy. Buying on credit is based upon the idea of possessing something before one can afford it. Advertising usually accompanies credit, and the two of them together seductively lure the unwary and weak. Yet because of the charges collected by the lender, credit actually makes things even more expensive, causing greater debt!

But, God asks in Jeremiah 6, who will listen? People will not listen to such simple wisdom as delaying a purchase to pay in cash to save money. They will not listen even when told they will be able to make more purchases because they will have more money to spend. They do not listen because their minds are on their sin. The cycle of sin continues onto other sins their covetousness motivates.

This is why tithing comes as such a shock to many new brethren. As a nation, we are living way over our heads. When we learn of tithing, the penalty for our prior stealing from God really hurts. We then have to learn to pay in adversity. Covetousness has boomeranged and caught us in a way we never dreamed.

Covetousness Is Idolatry

The word translated "covetousness" in Colossians 3:5 is the Greek word *pleonexia*. It is an ugly word describing an ugly sin. It is ugly because it is idolatry and destructive. Lexicons describe *pleonexia* as "the insatiable desire to have what rightfully belongs to others." It suggests ruthless self-seeking and an arrogant assumption that others and things exist for one's own benefit.

Covetousness is idolatry because it puts self-interest and things in the place of God. A man sets up an idol because he desires to get some pleasure or satisfaction from it. So he serves to get, which is

idolatry. The essence of idolatry, then, is to get for the self. Christians, though, must give themselves to God, and we do it by yielding to Him in obedience to whatever He says.

Colossians 3:5 says we are to "mortify therefore [our] members which are on the earth" (KJV). This does not mean merely to practice an ascetic self-discipline. It is a very strong word, meaning "to kill." The Christian must kill self-centeredness. He must radically transform his life, shifting the focus from himself to God. This is exactly what Jesus taught in Matthew 5:29-30. *Everything* that keeps us from fully obeying God and surrendering to Jesus Christ must be spiritually excised. The tenth commandment, like the first, serves as a governor, controlling whether we keep the others.

Desire Leads to Sin

James writes:

Let no one 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. (James 1:13-15)

Every problem, individual or national, has its root embedded in sin. But what causes sin? Wrong desires brought to fruition, and everyone—from peasant to king—is subject to wrong desires. From the beginning of time, sinners have blamed their sins on others. Satan blamed God, Eve blamed Satan, and Adam blamed Eve. James sternly rebukes this.

God does not cause sin, nor do things. Sin would be helpless if it did not appeal to something in man. Sin appeals to man's human nature through his desires. If a man desires long enough, the consequence is virtually inevitable. Desire becomes action.

Desire can be nourished, stifled or—by the grace of God—eliminated altogether. If we humbly, thoughtfully and wholly give of ourselves to Christ and involve ourselves in good activities and thoughts, we will have precious little time or place for evil desires. This commandment pierces through surface Christianity, really showing whether we have surrendered our will to God.

The spiritual requirements for keeping it are in some ways more rigid than any other because it pierces directly into our thoughts. II Corinthians 10:4-5 sets a very high standard for us to shoot for:

For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

These verses, revealing God's authority over even our thoughts, also sets what may be our ultimate goal in this life. The tenth commandment shows the depth of God's concern about the state of our inner character as well as our apparent character. If our thoughts are right, our actions will be too. Changing our thinking strikes right at the heart of character, emphasizing why spending time with God, in studying His Word and in prayer, is so important.

Hebrews 4:12 contains searching principles regarding our thoughts:

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.

God's Word is alive! This means it is eternal, always current, always essential, always true, pure and refined. Other writings fail when measured against these qualities, and they pass into oblivion. The Word of God is a discerner, a critic, of the heart's inner workings. It is penetrating, scrutinizing our desires, and we should test our thinking against what Scripture says is good.

Steps to Combat Covetousness

We can do a number of things to help ourselves considerably in this awesome responsibility:

Solomon says, "The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing" (Ecclesiastes 1:8). Here is where we must begin. We must combine humility with a measure of distrust in our own thinking. We must recognize that human nature is unstable and insatiable in satisfying itself. Do not be deceived; happiness and contentment are fruits of true spirituality. God has not given material things the power to satisfy man's spiritual needs.

Jesus advises us 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." The second and a most important step is to study, pray, fast, meditate and obey. Consciously practice God's way of life. This takes sacrifice and discipline, but it fills the mind with God's thoughts. This will eventually make sin foreign to us because we simply will not think to do it!

Proverbs 28:16 says, "A ruler who lacks understanding is a great oppressor, but he who hates covetousness will prolong his days." A third suggestion is to learn to hate covetousness, not things. Consciously study, meditate upon and observe what covetousness produces. It violates the basic principle of God's way of outgoing concern. Coveting keeps us from thinking like and listening to God. Being aware of the trajectory of a thought can help us avoid allowing it to have its way in our lives.

"Godliness with contentment is great gain," Paul writes in I Timothy 6:6. A fourth suggestion is to make it a spiritual exercise to be grateful for what we have. A couple, dissatisfied with the home they had lived in many years, frequently complained to each other and their friends about it. Finally deciding to sell it, they put it into the hands of an agent. The next Sunday, as they scanned the ads for new homes, the wife excitedly pointed to one that sounded like the perfect house for them. When they called their agent, he revealed that it was their own house!

Contentment and rejoicing move to a higher level when our focus is seeking the well-being of others, as shown in the following tale. A man had a dream of what happens to people after death. First, he was taken to see the fate of evil people. He saw long tables groaning under the weight of mountains

of food. Seated at the table were lean, ravenously hungry and frustrated people, who had huge forks tied splint-like to their arms so they could not bend their elbows. They were starving in the midst of plenty.

Then the man was taken to view the good. The scene was much the same: mountainous piles of food and people with huge forks tied splint-like to their arms. However, these people were happy and well-fed *because they were feeding each other*. They rejoiced in their lot and helped each other. Cooperation, joy and contentment is built on a loving heart that overcomes the covetous eye.

The Dynamic of Our Lives

Coveting is a hydra-headed monster whose tentacles of evil branch in every direction, inflicting destruction, sorrow and death on innocent bystanders and guilty participators alike. It plays no favorites, gathering its victims from all walks of life, because all are guilty of evil thoughts.

Jesus Christ has redeemed us from the power that makes us sin. He gives the power of His love to those striving to overcome the remnants of the old nature. Certainly, it is a tough and, in many cases, a long process. But with the help of God, if we make the effort, He will not fail us. We will overcome.

The dynamic of our new life is the coming of Jesus Christ. When royalty is expected, everything is made spit-and-polish clean and decorated for the royal eyes to see. Such is our task. A Christian is steadfastly making himself ready for the arrival of his King. Let us be among those who are "pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8)!