From Coveting to Contentment
Exodus 20:17

Two weeks ago, I found myself in a casual conversation about parenting. Near the end, someone said, "I've taught my two adult daughters this: You can only control what you do, not what you think or what you desire." And though I didn't rise in great protest, I understood, just as many of you do at hearing that sentence, the potential dangers of such counsel. For, what does one make of the tenth commandment if this is the baseline ethic? Or of the One issuing the commandment? Or of the human race? Or of one's self? Talk about a worldview in just a few words!

Such counsel is met head-on in the tenth commandment. The LORD does not merely hold us accountable for what we do with our hands or say with our mouths. He holds us accountable for what we cherish, crave, and cultivate in the innermost recesses of the heart. In its basic form, to covet is to desire wrongly. It is to crave what God has forbidden, to begrudge what He has given others, or to become discontented with what He has wisely provided. We might say that it's a wicked itch looking for a scratch; a dark hunger hunting down prey. We've already seen this sin in operation among Israel. In Exodus 16, they so craved the "*meat pots*" back in Egypt that gratitude for their freedom, which should have overwhelmed every benefit enjoyed while in chains, was missing in action.[1] Reflecting on Israel, the apostle Paul pointed back to the history of his people to teach the church at Corinth, and when he did he used the same language found here in Exodus 20 for ***covet***. 1 Corinthians 10:6, "*Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did*." To covet is to express an inward, sinister, faithless desire.

Repeatedly we've taken time to explain the Law as it relates to the inner person. This command takes the cake in that regard. In fact, it could be argued that each of the previous nine commandments most naturally connect to this tenth one.[2] Idols draw the heart's desire before they employ the hands' duties. Sabbath unrest is an inward disposition before anything else. Dishonor, murder, adultery, theft, and deceit germinate in the hidden places of the soul before showing their deformities in the home or community. And just in case some of us have yet to be persuaded that the root of breaking the commandments is a corrupt heart, this final commandment functions to make that abundantly explicit. You might contest that you've never murdered nor stolen by appealing to the criminal database at 201 Poplar, and by such a standard you would be technically right. But who can stand straight and tall under the prohibition of sinful *desires*? But just as my conversation yielded last week, not all have come to terms with what lies deep within every human heart.

I. The Command Given to Israel

You shall not covet… The possibilities for this easy-to-hide desire to latch onto are too numerous to count. Here, God begins with the prohibition of coveting ***the neighbor's house***.

For many reasons I'll never forget the week I graduated from seminary. One detail which made that week memorable was expressed inside a piece of snail mail I received weeks prior. It was an invitation to meet Dr. Albert Mohler and to visit his legendary library. I'm sure others would have

[1] Exodus 16:3
[2] Alec Motyer, *Exodus*, 230; John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: Vol. III*, 186.

preferred the Biltmore Estate, or Graceland down the street, but for the puffed-up know-it-all with an ink-wet degree in his back pocket, this was just short of seeing Paul's third heaven. Yet, to my shame I didn't leave that evening without a sense of embarrassment over our seven-hundred-square-foot Bartlett Hobbit hole. Furthermore, I didn't escape that night without coveting Albert and Mary's homefront. My desire exceeded what God had settled to provide for us during that season of life. And more than that, I recall daydreaming in the days that followed of living in *that* Louisville home surrounded by *that* library.

Remember, stemming from the eighth command, the desires to have a place and to have things are not sins. Assumed in this tenth command are physical provisions from God granted to specific peoples and families. A house. Family. Land. In fact, this was already in the cards for Israel. In Exodus 3 and 13, God had promised to give His people *a land flowing with milk and honey*, which is an emblematic expression of all Israel needed to be established into homes and communities under His blessing and rule. In fact, God's promise of such a place was intended to direct their desires for what was good. So, it's not sinful to desire good things for good and right reasons.

Nor should we view all desires as somehow taboo, much like Buddhist teachings, or that all desires are somehow expressions of dissatisfaction with God somehow.[3] It was God's plan from the beginning to make Himself known, and in knowing Him we hear the expectations of both sinful desires to be subdued, as well as good desires encouraged and rewarded.[4]

But the command continues to point us in the forbidden direction. Whereas the previous four commands likely involved legal actions and determinations, coveting stays below the radar of what might be played out in a formal legal setting. This sinful stirring can remain hidden from those around you, but never from the LORD over you and in you.[5] Yet these desires have playgrounds, and what Yahweh does here is grant them a kind of tour through the camp or through any future Promise-Land neighborhood. He moves from a ***neighbor's house*** to someone living in the neighbor's house—***a wife*** of another man. The cohesive structure of these ten words comes into greater focus in this last command. Coveting after another's house and another's spouse is when the engines of stealing and adultery fire up.

Furthermore, you could see how desiring another's ***male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey*** could destabilize that community or any community.[6] "Why do Ehud's employees work harder?" "Mr. Gad's oxen never get tired and he barely feeds them! But my lazy beasts have bottomless pits for appetites!" "Why does he have what I don't?" Then, so as not to leave anything to chance, God expresses the catch-all phrase which prohibited the coveting of ***anything that is your neighbor's***. This string of examples ending this particular way places a firm lid on further covetous explorations.

If Israel was to be holy among the nations, their starting point for heading off sinful patterns must be a point of emphasis.[7] They needed God to tell them of this internalized, foul creature living in

[3] Timothy Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable*, 91.
[4] Paul desired for his Jewish kinsmen to be saved in Romans 10:1. Hannah desired to have a child in 1 Samuel 1:10-11. If you fish around, you'll discover boatloads more.
[5] T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, 437.
[6] Alexander, 427.
[7] Douglas Stuart, *NAC: Exodus*, 467.

them called *coveting*. And they needed to know that they were accountable for more than what others could see.

II. The Command Understood Through Christ

We've insisted on supplying the perspective of Jesus through each of these commands. If He gave the Law flowing from His righteous character and kept the Law in perfect righteousness, it would seem a rather poor and irresponsible approach to preaching or teaching to neglect what He preached or taught on the subject. And He had much to say and much to show when it came to the desires of the heart, both wicked ones and holy ones.

Perhaps the clearest word Christ ever spoke on the subject was recorded by the Holy Spirit through Luke. In the context of Jesus being solicited to arbitrate a dispute regarding someone's inheritance, Jesus said in Luke 12:15, "*Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions*." Jesus is doing here what Jesus does in other places. He's being the omniscient, heart specialist, detecting the dark desires of a man sparring with his brother about stuff. And the wretched game from the wilderness of Egypt to the hillsides of Judea to the streets of Shelby County lives on. "I like that house." "I love that truck more than my piece of junk." "*His* job is actually awesome." "Her husband is much kinder than mine." The itch of human desire to have what others have runs soul-deep. It begins to show itself in the nursery, down the hall, to my left and to your right. And trying to scratch that itch with possessions and people outside of God's provision is akin to scratching the reflection of my itching beard in a broken mirror. Not only would that not satisfy, but it would be injurious to my fingers. Coveting is damaging to God's honor and injurious in our fellowship with Him. It is the beginning stage of eternal ruin.[8]

Jesus goes on in Luke 12 to illustrate the perils of mismanaged desires by the rich man who had nowhere to store his crops. The man said to himself, *"I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. [19] And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."' [20] But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' [21] So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God*."

This inner monologue was reflective of a life turned inward. The first-person pronouns show a man who is obviously self-sufficient.[9] But, as wealth often does to those whom it possesses, the parable also shows a man who is isolated. He has no need for others or more foundationally, for God. What were his first steps that led him down such a desolate, foolish road? His journey to death of the worst kind began on Covet St. He wasn't contented. He made maneuvers to prove it. In the end, his covetousness and greed were called to account. This tenth commandment, illustrated by Jesus with crops and barns, most certainly resonated with His dirt-under-the-fingernail, agrarian listeners.

But Jesus seemed to always be pointing the crowds to take inventory of their desires. Matthew 6:21, "*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*." The point? Don't let *who you are*

[8] The old progressive piece of wisdom still sticks, "Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny." I don't know where this originated.
[9] James Edwards, *PNTC: Luke*, 371.

at heart be determined by *what you have*. Yet, Jesus also pinpointed individuals. His exchange with Peter at the end of John's Gospel was telling in this way, "*Simon, son of John, do you love Me?*" What was Jesus doing but lasering in on where Peter's affections truly rested. He always knew the answers, and He knows the answer this hour. John wrote that Jesus, "*needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man*."[10] No heart is encrypted from Christ's perceptions.

The sovereign perception of Jesus unveiled by John's statement warrants cries for mercy. We're guilty of craving the world's poison, of pouring our time and energies into creating momentary pleasures, of being drawn away by Satan's deadly hooks covered in ever-tantalizing sights, smells, and sounds, and of being persuaded that lives built on the sand dunes of success and excess offer stability and permanence. And Jesus comes into the world, not only teaching us the dangers of coveting, or showing us a better way for imitation, but showing us flawlessness in His desires, affections, and longings. He desired the will of the Father.[11] He desired to glorify God.[12] He longed to share the glory with the Father as they had done so in eternity past.[13] He desired to gather and care for sinners like a mother hen her chicks.[14] He so wanted and indeed does give the restless rest.[15] His desires were aligned with the Father's.[16] Jesus has forever remained "*perfect*" in every desire and longing. And since that is true, He "*became the source of eternal salvation*" to all who believe on His name.[17] His spotless life in exchange for our soiled ones, at the cross. Otherwise, we wither underneath the revealing rays of the tenth commandment. Yet the perfect obedience of Christ, in which we rest for our salvation, does not mean that the battle against sinful desires has ended.

III. The Command Lived Out by Christ's People

Nonetheless, placing all our trust in the fact that Jesus never stepped out of bounds in His desires doesn't minimize our ongoing struggle to align and maintain God-honoring yearnings of the heart. The Christian life is a marathon, marked with difficult sprints, steep climbs, and heavy burdens, sometimes in the dark, with multiple adversaries lurking and sticking out their feet to trip us up. We'll never master coveting in this life, but coveting has mastered many. Here's one way Paul frames coveting, Colossians 3:5, "*Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry*." Why does he say this? Because almost at once one who covets makes a god of his possessions, asking more of those possessions than they can give.[18] So, we must fight against these inward, dark desires. Their nature is too aggressive for passivity of any kind. King Solomon was picturesque in his reflections on the heart hankerings of humanity. Proverbs 30:15–16 read, "*The leech has two daughters: Give and Give. Three things are never satisfied; four never say, 'Enough': [16] [the grave], the barren womb, the land never satisfied with water, and…fire*." The deep, unsatisfied nature inside us is reflected by these graphic realities of life. The intensity of the illustrations—leeches, grave, thirsty land, and fire—should teach us the difficulty of stewarding the heart.

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[10] John 2:25
[11] Hebrews 10:7
[12] John 17:1
[13] John 17:5
[14] Matthew 22:37
[15] Matthew 11:29
[16] John 5:19
[17] Hebrews 5:9
[18] J. Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain*, 122-123.

Yet, the Helper has come. Jesus was asked in John 14 what would be the line of demarcation between His people and the rest of the world. Here's what He said, *"If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.*"[19] And how will God Himself set about making a home with His people? Jesus said it a few verses prior, "…*the Spirit of truth…You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you*."[20] Zechariah avowed this coming to David's house, "*Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts*."[21] Here's the help we most need, and that we have in the kingdom of the LORD and His Christ!

He has written this command on our hearts, and by the Spirit we are enabled to live in step with it. One way I thought about this this week was how the Spirit is like the great Librarian of Scripture. His ongoing ministry is to take us to the Scriptures, and to particular ones according to our circumstances and needs of the moment or season. Related to coveting, He sometimes takes us to Eden as warning and caution, where our first parents set their desires on what God had forbidden. He sometimes takes us to Achan in Joshua 7 where he coveted a "*beautiful cloak from Shinar*" to show us that our desires aren't hidden from heaven and that they can have severe ramifications for others. He leads us to the places where we see the good work of the law in believers, like in the life of Paul. Coveting was the sin which wrecked Paul's sense of self-righteousness,[22] and he wrote of it, Ephesians 5:5, "*For you may be sure of this, that everyone…who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God*." These Spirit-led escorts through Scripture are helps so that we might put away coveting.

We put away, but the Spirit is also at work in us to produce good desires in concert with the Word. Soon He'll lead us together to Exodus 33 where God will use Moses longing to behold God's glory to stoke our own. We could run the gamut of Scripture to illustrate this. But perhaps more connected to our text this morning, by the Spirit we put to death covetousness, and He brings to life inside of us contentment with thanksgiving. Not overnight, but in Christ, we begin to pray and live inside words like this, Lord, "…*give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, [9] lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the LORD?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God*."[23] Oh, brothers and sisters, the wisdom of being content with what we already possess which is far beyond what we've ever deserved. With committed intention, we counter coveting with lives which settle into a kind and generous frame towards others. We aim prayerfully for the welfare of those within our sphere of influence.[24] However big the ship of our hunger for what we lack and dissatisfaction for what we possess, the wind of the Spirit can turn it by His infinite power ever at His disposal.

Conclusion

In our context marked by an embarrassment of riches in every way imaginable, the strong scent of "not enough" is ever drifting in the air. Every day we are blitzed with a tsunami of products and services and allurements that we must have now lest the sky fall. Our propensity to covet is played

[19] John 14:22-24
[20] John 14:17
[21] Zechariah 4:6
[22] Romans 7:7-10
[23] Proverbs 30:7-9
[24] https://thewestminsterstandard.org/westminster-larger-catechism/

upon day after day after day. We are bees drowning in the oversized barrel of honey![25] All the while, more than half the world would kill for the contents of my forthcoming lunch. We have overflowing shelves of food, basic healthcare, and about 200 people sitting in this sanctuary who would break a leg to help you if you or I were in dire straits. And more importantly, we've tasted and will never stop feasting on the grace of God. It's why the call for giving thanks in the scriptures is a repeated one.

When we truly look with Holy Spirit eyes at what God has provided for each of us, and for those we love, our neighbors' possessions grow strangely unattractive. In fact, the pattern is that the intensity of our froward wants lessens or die away altogether in His presence and under His gospel Word. Instead of coveting, might we be contented in so great a salvation, reflected at this table this morning.

[25] Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 178.