

## You Shall Not Covet

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All sin is evil, whatever form it takes. But the last of the Ten Commandments points us to the root problem in all sin: a heart that feeds on forbidden fruit.

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*“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” (Ex. 20:17).*

*“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.’ But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead” (Rom. 7:7-8).*



The Hebrew word translated “covet” literally means “to delight in” something. The word can have a positive use (for example, the word of God is to be “desired”—literally, “coveted”—more than gold, Psa. 19:10). However, the more common use of the word is in describing a dark desire that is so strong, so passionate, so intense, that it threatens to override our better judgment.

Notice that God had already forbade adultery (Commandment #7); so why add a prohibition against coveting my neighbor's wife? Stealing was also addressed earlier (#8); so what's the point of outlawing a desire for my neighbor's house, or servants, or ox? The

command not to covet seems to be a redundancy that does not directly address the real social issues covered by the others.

In fact, the command not to covet is *the foundation* that undergirds all the other commandments. With the possible exception of the First Commandment (“You shall have no other gods before Me”), this is the only commandment that addresses the inner life of the individual. It is not enough to avoid the overt sins of idolatry, murder, adultery, theft, cursing, etc. God demands that we purge our hearts of even *the desire* to commit these deeds. A holy life starts with a pure heart.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is a commentary on the Tenth Commandment. It is not murder or adultery that gets us in trouble; strong social barriers usually prevent us from going that far. What condemns us is the anger and lust eating away inside us (Matt. 5:21-30). If we allow these evil passions to fester in our mind, sooner or later they will corrupt our character in a thousand little ways short of the actual crime.

All the classic sins of the heart—pride, lust, anger, greed, envy, jealousy, selfishness, hatred—are nothing more than extensions of this evil desire that we allow to dwell deep inside our heart. Covetousness rots our soul from within. Others may not see it, but God sees it. We know it, too, and despise ourselves for it.

That's what makes this Commandment the hardest of all to keep. When Paul described his own anguished struggle with sin in Romans 7, he illustrated the complex relationship between law and sin using the last commandment, “you shall not covet.” More than any other sin, this one was the toughest to beat. The Law against coveting was simple and clear; but how could Paul keep it consistently? He struggled with “all manner of evil desire,” and God's law only highlighted his failure to keep it under control. Paul is not blaming God's Law for his sin problem. Rather, he is acknowledging the role of the Law in helping him understand his personal failings as a human being. And it was precisely in this area of his *inner desires* that his failures were the most glaring and painful.

When David pleaded, “Search me, O God, and know my heart” (Psa. 139:23), he was acknowledging the awful truth of the Tenth Commandment: Until we can get the innermost desires of our heart under control, we will always be slaves to sin's destructive power.

— David King