

(Devotional #32) **Christian Liberty and the Law – The Ten Commandments:**
The 10th Commandment: Thou Shalt Not Covet
(Exodus 20:17)

WHAT SHALL WE THEN SAY? That the Law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the Law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to **covet** if the Law had not said, **‘YOU SHALL NOT COVET’** – **Romans 7:7**

AND HE SAID TO THEM, ‘take care, and be on guard against all **covetousness**, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions’ – **Luke 12:15**

PUT TO DEATH, therefore, what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry – **Colossians 3:5**

YOU SHALL NOT COVET YOUR NEIGHBOR’S HOUSE; YOU SHALL NOT COVET YOUR NEIGHBOR’S WIFE OR HIS MALE SERVANT OR HIS FEMALE SERVANT OR HIS OX OR HIS DONKEY OR ANYTHING THAT BELONGS TO YOUR NEIGHBOR – **Exodus 20:17**

(“**Thou Shalt Not Covet**” is the King James translation of the 10th Commandment.)

One could say, **‘OUR CULTURE VALUES COVETING.’ MADISON AVENUE INCITES US TO COVET!** Think about the Media. The Media has made an industry out of discontent. The never-ending message is: **‘Look at these people! They are living a great life! Look at what they have! Now look in the mirror – at YOU! If you had what they have, you would be happy too! BUY TODAY, PAY TOMORROW! Don’t worry if you don’t have the money – CHARGE IT! You can have it now – interest free for six months!’**

One writer has said, “the American motto no longer is, **LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS**; it is **LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURCHASE OF HAPPINESS**. Covetousness rules! And therefore this 10th and final Word from God’s own finger, has much to say to us today.

The word ‘**covet**’ is the Hebrew word חָמַד – (pronounced **HAMAD**). This is an interesting word that reflects the subtle line that often exists between ‘good and evil.’

In Genesis 2:9, **HAMAD** is translated ‘**pleasing**’ in the description of the trees growing in the Garden of Eden that were ‘**PLEASING to the eyes and good for food**,’ but a few verses later in Genesis 3:6, the same word occurs in the description of Eve’s ‘**coveting**’ the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. There we read, “**When she saw the tree was good for food and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was DESIRABLE**” (this is our word **HAMAD**), “**she took and ate.**”

James 1:13-15 clarifies what happened in Genesis. In just a few verses, the text explains the progression that leads from *temptation to sin to death*: ‘**when we are tempted, we are carried away by THE OLD SIN NATURE that produces LUST that leads to SIN that leads to DEATH** (James paraphrased). Coveting (or desire) — initiates this progression from temptation to desire to death.

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament¹, the term chosen to translate **HAMAD** (‘to covet’) in Exodus 20:17 is ἐπιθυμέω (pronounced *epithumeo* [ἐπί / epi – (upon) + θυμός / thumos – (mind / or

¹ In the third century, B.C., the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek by a council of rabbis living in Alexandria, Egypt, where after the conquest by Alexander the Great, Greek was the spoken language. This translation is called ‘the Septuagint’ and is abbreviated by the Roman Numeral for ‘seventy’ (LXX).

heart)] **Thus, 'to covet' is 'TO SET THE MIND UPON SOMETHING' ... and unfortunately, since the Old Sin Nature is involved, this 'setting of the mind' soon becomes 'an obsession.'**

James uses the nominal form (i.e., *a noun*) of the same word: **"But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own LUST" (epithumia) – James 1:14.**

So James is speaking to the exact sin that is prohibited by the 10th Commandment.

Understanding what coveting is gives us practical insight into the pathology of sin. The reason we do what is wrong, is because *we covet doing wrong* more than *we covet doing right* ... We sin because *we desire to have* more than we desire to know God and serve Him. This is what makes coveting so dangerous. Of all the sins, coveting is the most subtle.

When 'a thing desired' is aligned with what God desires for man – this 'desire' is not wrong; but if the 'desire' is for something God has forbidden, it takes on the character of 'sin' and 'sin' then results in 'death.'

All the things mentioned in Exodus 20:17 that we are not to covet have been forbidden already by one of the preceding commandments:

- The Neighbor's House – (Commandment #8 – *Thou Shalt Not Steal Private Property*),
- The Neighbor's Wife – (Commandment #7 – *Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery*),
- The Neighbor's Servants and Animals – (also Commandment #8 – *Thou Shalt Not Steal*) – in fact, **ANYTHING that belongs to your neighbor is off limits** – not only off limits for you to **HAVE** but also off limits for you to **DESIRE**.

At the heart of coveting is obsession with self. Coveting is about me and me alone.

THE 10TH COMMANDMENT IS 'THE SHOW STOPPER' — It's the show stopper for anyone who seeks to earn his own righteousness through the Mosaic Law (or any law-keeping exercise). You may remember in Philippians 3, Paul extolled himself as **'one who might have confidence in the flesh,'** for he said of himself:

- (I was) circumcised the eighth day,
- (I was) a citizen of the nation of Israel (i.e., born under the covenants),
- (I was) of the Tribe of Benjamin,
- (He was) a Hebrew of Hebrews,
- As to the Mosaic Law — (He was) a Pharisee,
- As to the righteousness that is by means of the Law, i.e., as to those 'actions' forbidden or commanded by the Law of Moses — (He was) blameless.

Yet when the Apostle evaluated his success at keeping the Law, it was the 10th Commandment he cited as the one that condemned him³.

Paul could control his actions – *he could avoid 'the big sins'* – and he could *'do the good works'* expected of a religious man, but Paul could not control the desires emanating from his Old Sin Nature that were made manifest by the 10th Commandment: **"THOU SHALT NOT DESIRE"**

² Notice, the beginning of sin is not an act; it is a decision – a state of mind – a desire. Satan's first sin is described in Ezekiel 28:15 like this: "You were blameless in your ways (i.e., in your actions) from the day you were created, until the day evil was found IN YOU." An action cannot be 'in you,' but a desire can be 'in you.' And it is this evil desire that results in an evil act. All sin begins with 'coveting.'

³ See Romans 7:7-8

As an example, it is possible to quit smoking through an act of the will – but no one can ‘*will himself*’ not to **WANT** (*desire*) a cigarette — Yet this commandment says: “**THOU SHALT NOT DESIRE THAT THING YOU DESIRE.**” [*Not doing and not wanting are infinitely different!*]

As Paul reminds us in Colossians 3:5 and in Ephesians 5:5, ‘*covetousness is idolatry.*’ It is idolatry because it causes us to desire something more than God. What one *wants* becomes more important than God Himself; thus, we have come full circle, for this last commandment takes us back to the first commandment, which in turn, condemns the very idolatry the 10th Commandment incites! No other gods are permitted! Worship only God! When we covet, we worship what we desire more than God. Coveting is a deliberate rejection of the provisions God has made. When we covet, we are asserting God’s provision is insufficient! A covetous man doubts God’s wisdom, goodness, justice, and love.

The Lesson of the 10th Commandment is this:

Even after having done nothing illegal by human standards, a person can be ‘*morally guilty*’ before God because of those things he or she desires, for the 10th Commandment reveals the weakness of the Torah, which is helpless to change the depravity of the human heart. A man may strive to keep Commandments 1-9, but inevitably he will stumble on Commandment #10 – for **THE LAW imposes on us what it cannot give to us; BUT GRACE gives all that it imposes.**

The Torah – *The Law of Moses* – has a doubly painful effect on fallen man:

- (1) First, it frustrates the man who tries to keep it, and then ...
- (2) The Law condemns him.

But the Mosaic Law also anticipates a New Covenant, a covenant that will be written not on tablets of stones but on the hearts of men. This is the New Covenant Jesus established through the shedding of His blood, and under which He offers salvation to all who put their trust in him. And why would you not trust in Him when it is so clearly evident that you cannot attain righteousness through the Law of Moses? The fact that not one of us can live up to his own standards, should be sufficient to convict us of the undeniable fact that we cannot live up to God’s standards. So, the Law of Moses, when combined with our own inability to keep it, serves as a tutor⁴ to convict us of sin, it manifests to us our own inadequacies, and it leaves us with a glaring need for God’s Grace – and it is in this Grace that Christian Liberty flourishes.

The remedy to the sin of coveting is the grace of God in forgiveness, followed by a wholehearted desire to worship only Him. As the writer to Hebrews reminds us, “***fix your eyes on Jesus***” – stay focused on Him; consider Him and recall the blessings that are ours in Christ alone, procured by Christ alone, and secured by Christ alone. He is our joy and hope. In him we have all that we need.

If Danny Simpson had known more about guns, he might not have robbed the bank. But in 1990, in Ottawa, Canada, this 24-year-old went to jail, and his gun went to a museum. He was arrested for robbing \$6,000 from a bank, and for this he was sentenced to six years in jail. In the robbery, Danny used a .45-caliber Colt semi-automatic pistol, which turned out to be an antique made in 1918 by the Ross Rifle Company of Quebec City, Canada. This pistol was worth in excess of \$100,000 — much more than Danny Simpson had stolen. If he had just known what he carried in his hand, he wouldn’t have robbed the bank. In other words, Danny already had what he needed; he just didn’t know it. ***Lesson: Don’t be Danny Simpson!***

⁴ See Galatians 3:21-28

CONCLUDING REMARKS TO THE STUDY OF THE COMMANDMENTS:

Exodus 20:18-21 forms the conclusion to the Ten Commandments:

And as the people were perceiving the thunder and the lightening and the sound of the shofar and the mountain smoking, they trembled, and they stood at a distance – Exodus 20:18

The things Israel experienced as part of God's revelation of Himself, terrified the people. While we tend to think of the 10 Commandments as tablets of stone, they were in essence the revelation of God's character and God's values. Standing behind these commands, is a value statement that reveals to us what matters to God.

God values wholehearted, complete allegiance to him. In this world, there is competition for our allegiance, not all of which is evil in and of itself – (e.g., jobs, family, church, and different things that demand our duty). But as C.S. Lewis states: **“Our problem is not that we love things too much, but that we don't love God enough.”** He is the groom and we are His bride. We are committed to no one else – no substitutes allowed.

God gave Israel observable evidence of His commitment to His people and to His covenants. When the people saw the plagues of Egypt, the dividing of the sea, the daily provision of 'manna,' and the water' from the Rock of Horeb – these were evidence of God's provision for His people. Then He gave them the Law at Mount Sinai.

The reference to 'lightening' is interesting. 'Lightening' is the Hebrew word לָפִיד – (pronounced **LAPID**). Normally it is translated 'torch'. It occurs only a few times in the Old Testament – here in Exodus Chapter 20, when God revealed His Law to Israel, and in Ezekiel 1:13 in the context of a Theophany⁵. Then it appears again in Genesis 15:17, where we see 'lapid' translated 'torch,' – (the torch that passed between the sacrificial animals that had been divided for the ceremony ratifying the Abrahamic Covenant – a 'Grace Covenant').

So, the term seems to occur when God is revealing Himself in some miraculous, albeit mediated way, and may be intended here to link what is happening at Mount Sinai back to the founding covenant with Abraham (i.e., linking the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants). Note that “all the people” are viewing God's revelation (vs.18) because the intent is for all of them to respond in faithful obedience to who He is and what He has done for them.

God gives Himself to the nation as Israel's God and redeems the people from slavery. He is the faithful God, the covenant-making God, the covenant-keeping God, and the all-powerful-God. And what God did for Israel, God also has done for us who know him today⁶. According to Ephesians 2:1-3, apart from God, our spiritual condition is a terminal condition. We are 'dead, depraved and doomed.' We are helpless and hopeless – but then Jesus came! He rescued us. It is only by his grace we are saved and kept.

It is precisely because He saves and keeps us that we are commanded to love Him only. The Ten Commandments guide us down the path of loving God. The commandments are not designed to exist on a plaque or on tablets of stone; they are designed to be written on our hearts and lived as an expression our love for God.

⁵ A 'theophany' is a physical manifestation of God's presence.

⁶ See Romans 5:8

Another point that should not be missed is: *'the commandments were given to Israel under the divine name (^ELOHIM). This is an indication that **though given to Israel, the Ten Commandments have application to the whole world.**'* Likewise, it is not just Israel that is to love the Lord-God; the whole world is to love Jesus Christ by keeping His commandments ... He stated this very clearly in John 14:15: ***"IF YOU LOVE ME, YOU WILL KEEP MY COMMANDMENTS."***

As Christians, we have freedom ... Christian Liberty that is grounded in the pure Grace of the Savior ... nothing can take that away from us. And as a result, and because of gratitude for the salvation we have in Christ, we should strive to live in concert with God's Character, expressed in these TEN WORDS – the Commandments – not to earn anything from God, but because it is His desire that we reflect **HIM** in the way we live our lives.

This is the beauty of the Ten Commandments. They are a guide to instruct us about ourselves (*we are sinners*), societies (*nations cannot break God's Laws and survive*), but most of all, we learn from them what God Himself is like. We bear His image in us from creation; why would we not desire to reflect His Character in our own characters? *May God the Holy Spirit grant us the grace to do so – to the extent possible – and to convict us when we fall short.*