

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Des Moines, Wash. November 7, 2010

“The Ten Commandments” series

Exodus 20:17

“Do Not Covet!” – Really?

1. Why is this so serious?
2. What can be done about it?

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All Scripture quotations from the NIV.

Exodus 20:17 - “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

It was the mid-1800s. A Springfield, IL, resident was drawn to his door one day by the crying of children. When he looked out his door, he saw Abraham Lincoln passing by with his young two sons. Both sons were crying very loudly. “What is the matter with the boys?” asked the man. Lincoln looked over and answered, “Just what’s the matter with the whole world! I’ve got three walnuts and each wants two!” (From “Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and the War Years” by Carl Sandburg, Edward C. Goodman)

Things don’t change much, do they? As we reach the end of our sermon series on the Ten Commandments, we delve into an area similar to that which Lincoln experienced. It is the area of “coveting,” a word not often used that we must learn about.

The Ninth and Tenth Commandments state: “*You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*” The definition of the word **covet** is “desire.” The word actually can be used in a positive or negative sense, depending on the situation. For example, Genesis 2 tells us that

the trees God planted in the Garden of Eden were “*pleasing to the eye.*” (same Hebrew word as “covet” in the 9/10 Commandments) That was a good thing! However, when the serpent tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, we read that same phrase, which says she saw it was “pleasing to the eye.” (“covet”) This was wrong. It was a sinful desire, which is the definition of “covet” in the bad sense. The idea is that you are not satisfied with what you have, but want something that should not necessarily be yours, even to the point of obsession.

What are we not to covet? The commandments tell us not to covet our neighbor’s house, wife, manservant, maidservant, ox, donkey, or anything of his. Don’t think this list is outdated. We don’t have servants or these animals as much nowadays, but putting it more in our language, we might read that we should not covet our neighbor’s “house, wife, tools, cars, toys, possessions, or anything.”

Perhaps you are thinking, “Really? Why not? Whom am I hurting by desires? After all, pastor, this will be a very hard, if not the hardest, commandment to obey! Are we really supposed to keep this one? And how can I?” **So today in our study of coveting, let’s ask two questions:**

1. Why is this so serious?
2. What can be done about it?

1 – The first reason that coveting is a serious matter is explained in James 1: “*Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.*” Desire is the first step toward action. In fact, we could say that just about all outward sins have usually been committed already in the heart.

A key Bible story that teaches this served as our first reading today, the account of Naboth’s vineyard. Wicked King Ahab and his more-wicked wife Jezebel demonstrate it well. Naboth had a vineyard next door to Ahab’s palace. Because of its proximity, Ahab thought it would be convenient to acquire the property and turn it into a vegetable garden. He made what appeared

to be a very fair offer to Naboth. It was not wrong of Ahab to want the vineyard property. It was not even wrong for him to make an offer for it. However, the vineyard was a special inheritance to Naboth, one he did not want to sell. Then we hear where Ahab crossed the line: *“So Ahab went home, sullen and angry... He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat.” (1 Kings 21:4)*

We heard about what this sinful desire eventually led to. Ahab sulked and pouted so much that his wife Jezebel hatched a plan to get him what he wanted. She forged letters in Ahab’s name and proclaimed a fast. This was normally done in an effort to draw out some sin among the people that would potentially lead to punishment from the Lord. She acquired two false witnesses to testify that Naboth had cursed God and the king, a deed worthy of death. She had Naboth murdered so his property would be turned over to the state.

Such is the danger of sinful desire. Coveting leads to action. Going back to Lincoln’s sons. Where do you think their coveting two little walnuts might lead, especially if their father hadn’t been nearby? Shouting? Pushing? Shoving? Fighting? Stealing? Lying? Stabbing? Murder? It eventually led to that with the first murder in the Bible. Coveting leads to other sins, and James tells us it can lead to death, eternal death.

A second reason this is a serious matter is in Hebrews 13: *“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’”* Coveting reveals dissatisfaction, even if you don’t act on your impulses! An English lord was coming downstairs one morning, and he heard the cook exclaim, “Oh, if I only had five pounds, wouldn’t I be content!” Thinking the matter over, and anxious to see the woman satisfied, he shortly afterwards handed her a five-pound note, then worth about \$25. She thanked him very warmly. He paused outside the kitchen door because he wanted to hear if she would express her satisfaction a bit more and perhaps even thank God. As soon as his shadow was invisible, she

cried out, “Why didn’t I say ten?!” That is discontent! And that is a sin.

How common this is today! I even saw it in our twins when they were only a few months old. When I picked one of them up, I saw the look of “Why are you picking up her and not me?” Or “Why can’t I have that toy instead of her?” I have heard how parents have to be very careful to satisfy everyone’s sense of equal-ness with something like Christmas presents. Perhaps you know this by personal experience!

But this is not just true in children. How about teens? Can they covet? Oh yes! How many teens do you know that are satisfied with their looks? At that stage of life, how many teens aren’t coveting the athletic ability or the report card of more talented classmates? How many teens aren’t coveting the boyfriend or girlfriend of another person? It happens every day. And adults—just as bad! Can you even guess how many adults are craving their friend’s spouse, not satisfied with their own? Could you guess how many adults are working to keep up with the standard of possessions of people around them? Or are driven to distraction because of the vacations others are taking? Or want a house just like their relatives? Discontent, dear Christians, is what drives our country and its economy. Beware!

One more reason exists, which shows us why this is such a serious matter. In fact, it is the most serious reason of all. In Mark 7 Jesus said, *“What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”*

We said before that this may be the most difficult of all commandments to keep, yes, even impossible. Up till this commandment, our sinful nature may have had some rational arguments for our conscience, minimizing our guilt:

- *“You shall have no other gods”?* Sure, pastor, I may focus on money or material things a little more than I should, but it’s

not like I spend my life worshiping a completely false god!

- “Remember the Sabbath Day”? So I’m not in church every Sunday, but at least I go pretty regularly, which is more than a lot of people can say.
- “You shall not commit adultery”? Yes, my eyes may occasionally wander, but I’d never go so far as to cheat on my beloved and have an affair.
- “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor”? There are times I should say nicer things, but for the most part, I try to find something good to say.

Then we reach the commandments on coveting. We see where sin comes from and what we’re about. There is not room here for rationalizing, justifying, excusing, or minimizing our sin, for we are shown what we are by nature. Here we get a glimpse of the fountain of sin – our own heart. And it isn’t very pretty. In fact, it shows us what we are. Sin is not an occasional bad choice or slip of the tongue. It’s not even something you do. It’s who you are.

This is why coveting is a serious matter!

2 – This leads us to our second question about the commandments concerning coveting: **What can be done about it?** There are two directions our thoughts can go. One is to despair. To give up and perish, or perhaps to sin it up before you die. The other direction is to look up to God as a beggar. In fact, when we do look up to God as a beggar, we actually see our only glimmer of hope and our only reason we have to rejoice.

First, we will be able to rejoice in what Jesus coveted. That may seem like a funny way to put it, but what did Jesus covet?

- One of the most emotional statements we hear from Jesus is what he said close to the end of his earthly ministry. About his beloved Jerusalem he lamented, “*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how*

often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.” (Matthew 23:37) He coveted the salvation of his people.

- Philippians 2 also talks about what he coveted: “*(He) did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant... he humbled and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!*”

Jesus coveted the salvation of mankind.

He wanted you to spend eternity with him. Therefore, he was willing to die so that it might be secured. When we could not save ourselves and pay our debt of sin, he paid all that we owed on the cross that God demands in order for us to enter heaven. Heaven’s door is thrown open wide on account of Jesus blood and righteousness!

We have another reason to rejoice. In Ezekiel 36 the Lord tells his OT people, “*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.*” We can rejoice in God’s gift of a new heart.

Doctors can do amazing things when it comes to transplanting hearts. They can take a diseased, clogged heart out of an individual and replace it with a relatively healthy heart. Yet no doctor can do what God has done to you spiritually. **He has converted your heart of stone by the waters of baptism or by the proclamation of his Word and he has changed it to a heart of faith.** This hearts wants to follow God’s ways as his dear child.

One more thought remains with what can be done about this serious situation. Galatians 5 says, “*The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other.*” Realize the battle. **Realize that you are now at war.**

Paul described this war in Romans 7, when he writes, *“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.”* Every day you will be faced with choices for your actions on some level or another. You will be tempted to follow your sinful nature, your covetous side.

How can we avoid the evil choices? How can we put down that sinful nature and have pure thoughts and motives?

- Galatians 5 says, *“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.”* We need to crucify our sinful nature! We do this by repenting of our sins and resolving to live our lives for Jesus! How often do we need to repent of our sins? Every day! Martin Luther called this “drowning.” He said that we need to drown the “Old Adam,” as he called it, in daily contrition and repentance. He said that he did do this, but that guy could really swim! Every day he was back again working his evil. And every day we need to repent again and put him down again, as Luther did.
- A second way we do this is in Matthew 6: *“Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* In other words, put your priorities in order. Realize the true role that money and possessions play in our lives.
- Philippians 2 tells us, *“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”* This will help put down the sinful nature! Look out for others before yourself! And interesting way Exodus 23 puts it is this: *“If you come across your enemy’s ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him.”* There are countless ways we can do this for those around us!

As we do this, Psalm 37 tells us: *“Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.”* God will give you all you need, and the contentment in life that everyone is looking for.

Dear brothers and sisters, this ends our study of God’s Ten Commandments in our sermon series. What can we say as we finish? Marvel first at the depth of sin that we have fallen into. How tainted with sin we are, through and through! Then marvel at the love of our Savior for sinners like us. How amazing that he would lay his life down for us, and offer the gift of salvation through faith by the Holy Spirit. Amazing truths!

May we now use these Ten Commandments as a guide in our life of thanks to the One who has won salvation for us. Amen.

(Martin Luther once said that Christians ought to use the things of this world like a shoemaker uses his tools. He will get them out and do his work, but then when he puts them away forgets about them. After all, they’re only his tools. In the same way, we use the things of this world as necessities, but don’t dwell on them or put our real trust in them!)