

## EXODUS 20:17 5-27-18

### *You Shall Not Covet*

We come today to the tenth and last of those laws which so concisely present the moral dictates of our God. Commandment #10 is found in Exodus 20:**17** *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.* Now immediately you will see that this last commandment says something very important about the law of God, about what God expects of his people. While you think on what that may be, look with me at the story of the rich young ruler in Luke 18 where we read of an encounter with Jesus of a young wealthy aristocrat. No doubt this young man came from a well-respected, high-society Jewish home. He had had all the advantages of that kind of upbringing so that when Jesus confronted him with the second table of the law in verse 20 he was able to say **21** *"All these things I have kept from my youth."* What things was he talking about? Look closely at verse 20 where Jesus says **20** *You know the commandments, Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.* What is that? A list of the second table of the law - our duties toward our fellow man. But the list isn't complete is it? There is one commandment notably absent from this list. The rich young man claimed obedience to each of these but then Jesus pulled out his ace in the hole so to speak **22-23** *When Jesus heard this, He said to him, "One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." 23 But when he had heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.* What was Jesus indirectly confronting the man with in verse 22? The tenth commandment. Thou shalt not covet. How is it different from the others? In this very important way: you cannot covet with your hands or your mouth can you? Coveting is not an action it is an attitude. It deals with the affections of the heart. So what? The what is this. If coveting is a matter of attitude rather than behavior then the law of God clearly addressed not only behavior but attitude. That is a critical thing for us to understand. It is possible for individuals of fine upbringing, who have in their lives a tremendous network of positive moral pressure to deceive themselves into thinking that their outward good conduct, their rule-following temperament, has met the standard of God's righteousness. I mean, if you take a certain externalistic approach to the commandments it is possible that this young man had kept them all. He had never murdered or stolen or committed adultery. Sure, he had wanted to often enough but he had caught himself and never stepped over the

line. But this coveting thing is of a different nature. It is a command that requires us to look at more than just our behavior doesn't it. It calls for a look within. It calls for a righteousness that is more than outward, but is in fact, heartfelt and deep.

It was in the first century that Jesus came. It was in the context of first century Judaism that He ministered and taught. Different eras and different peoples have their peculiar faults and the error of first century Judaism that Jesus attacked most vigorously is the error we can call externalism. It is that for which the pharisees were famous. Externalism is the belief that what counts about a person is that which is visible, audible, tangible. And obedience is essentially a matter of behavior and not a matter of heart. Jesus jumped all over that mistaken notion. In Matthew 23 he gives his list of woes to the scribes and pharisees and he says in verse **25** *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence.* You see, they were concerned about religious externals and not what is within. **26-28** *You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. 27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. 28 So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.* Hey, those are strong words but let's be careful how we react. Some of us who have dirty exteriors to match our dirty hearts may take a fool's comfort from this. But don't miss the point. He isn't saying that outward things are not important. He is only saying they are not the heart of the matter. And what is the heart of the matter? It is the matter of the heart. There was a man who had a gas heater in his house and he awoke one night smelling a really awful odor. He soon figured it was coming from the heater but since he wasn't up to messing with it he got out some cologne and just doused himself with it in order to drown out the smelly gas. Having done that he went back to sleep and never woke up. The coroner who examined him made this remark: *he smells great, but he's dead.* There are lots of humans like that, like the pharisees, careful to make a good impression but with insides full of poison. The lesson of the tenth commandment is to get beyond externals. We are to take a serious look at what is in us. In another encounter with Jewish error Jesus rebuked them for their excessive attention to dietary rules and He said in Mark 7:**20-23** (NLT) *It is what comes from inside that defiles you. 21 For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, 22 adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and*

*foolishness. 23 All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you.* So if you want to deal with sin in your life where do you have to start? At the root of the problem which is a depraved character, a fallen heart, a messed up way of thinking. Pay all the attention you like to the externals of Christian obedience, to church attendance and Bible Study and tithing and general clean living and you will end up at best, a pharisee, if you fail to do business with the deep corruption of your soul. Proverbs 4:**23** *Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.* The tenth commandment confronts us with the true nature of Biblical righteousness. It makes sure we know that God's law addresses the thought and intents of the heart. Do you see that? Do you take it seriously? Some of you are content with external moral fitness only while you violate without conscience the tenth commandment and really the whole spirit of the moral law. May God use this commandment to drive the spirit of the pharisee far from us and lead us into the heart of our God.

We move now to look at how the tenth commandment is often violated. I find that most people understand what coveting is. It is a strong attraction to or desire for that which is the possession of another person. We know that. But are we aware of those occasions when we commit this sin? Consider the various ways we covet and the various things we covet. The commandment itself offers a short list of the kinds of things we sinfully desire. It mentions your neighbor's house. That is fairly common for some of you. Always wishing you had a place like so and so's, there on the water or up in the mountains, or with the great room for entertaining. Never content with the house you are living in. Your neighbor's wife. Uh-oh. Every time you have inwardly cursed God for that man or woman you are married too. Or every time you have thought how nice it would be to have a wife who looks like that Bernie's or behaves like Oscar's you have sinned. Every time you have thought how great it would be to have a husband who is kind like Amanda's guy or makes a living like Fiona's you have sinned. The list goes on to include male servant, female servant, ox and donkey - not the typical things we struggle with. But it concludes by saying "or anything that belongs to your neighbor." And *anything* includes a great deal doesn't it? Cars, clothes, various possessions that could be lumped under the heading of *riches*. The New Testament word for coveting is often translated "greed." The love of money and you know what the Bible says about loving money right? I Timothy 6:**9** *Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.* That verse alone should be sufficient to explain why God gave us the tenth commandment. Coveting is a

soul destroying sin. I Timothy 6:**10** *For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.* What is at the root of lying, and stealing and neglecting your kids and neglecting your church and worrying? These things and others flow from a love of money. That is coveting. It is a problem among the rich and a problem among the poor. It affects young people and old people, women and men, all races included. But strangely enough, if I were to ask this group how many of you are lovers of money, I would get zero to five affirmative answers because it is a deceitful sin. It's a disease no one seems to know they have. You think, "Oh, I don't love money!" But you love the security it brings, or at least seems to promise. I know I fall into this trap. Do you? I find that older persons who went through the depression value money more for this reason. Young persons think, *I don't love money* but younger people tend to value the pleasures it brings, the trips, the toys. A big bank account doesn't turn us on but a big vacation or some fancy adult toy gets us motivated. And we are smart enough to know what you need to get that stuff. Now, Scripture does not condemn us when we enjoy these kinds of gifts, but oftentimes our hearts get too wrapped up in them. Truth is - we have a huge problem with loving money.

But that's not all. We also covet another person's status or office. We covet their notoriety. We covet their abilities and wish we could have his or her charm or brains or brawn or gifts. What is it with you? What lack in your life do you secretly or not so secretly bemoan? I'll share my sins. When I was a little boy I envied people with swimming pools. That would make me content I thought. As a teenager I matured considerably. I no longer wanted such crass material things, as a teen I wanted abilities. I wanted to be taller, to run faster, to jump higher. What a basketball player I could be if I were 6-5, or if I could jump like my teammates, or if I had blazing speed. I coveted those qualities. But I got over that. Now I covet really adult stuff. I envy those pastors who have charming personalities and know how to work a room or know how to inspire people to follow their vision. I envy those pastors who have fast-growing churches and get asked to speak at conferences. I don't mean I wallow in this but there are times when I am less than happy with God over how He has wired me and where He has put me. What do you think about that? It's pretty stupid isn't it? I mean, what percentage of the population is taller than me? What percentage of pastors have a better situation than me with a lovely congregation in a lovely community? Very very few. But what does that tell you about coveting? It's a heart problem not a circumstance problem. Did you hear me? It's a heart problem not a circumstance problem. There is always

someone better off than you and worse off than you. Comparison is crazy. Besides, where did we get this notion that we all have a right to an equal share of the good things of life? That's a fallacious idea and it plays folly in our lives. In our country all people are born equal under the law. That's the promise of America, but there is no equality in talents, abilities, opportunities or wealth. So, everybody has a choice: be content with what you have or crave the possessions of others. Which have you chosen? I'll tell you how you can tell. Coveting is basically an invisible sin right? I mean, you don't have a Pinocchio nose that grows when you covet. But, there are symptoms. Grumbling is one. Related to that is bitterness. You are bitter at your parents or your spouse or your kids or your boss or your society. And most of all, consciously or not, you are bitter at God. You don't love God much because, as you see it, He ain't done much for you. Hey, do you think covetous people are fun to be around? No, as a rule they are sour, negative, generally unhappy, quick to complain and always dwelling on what they don't have. If that is you take a look within and see if you don't have a coveting heart full of self-pity and unfulfilled lust. You see, the devil wants to make you think the problem is out there –with society, with other persons. And there may be some problems out there, but God wants you to see the root of it is in you.

Coveting is guaranteed to make us miserable because there are two possible outcomes when we covet or when we pursue after temporal, earthly, material goals. One possibility is that you may never succeed. Your dream home or dream job or dream marriage may never come and since your heart was set on this you are shattered and crushed. Your faith falls to pieces. You are disillusioned. People like that are sad folks. Sad folks. And doubly so, when you realize that the other possibility is no better. Coveters are in a lose-lose situation, because even when you obtain what you wanted and you acquire your neighbor's house or your neighbor's job, even when you reach those earthly goals you had set for yourself you find they do not satisfy. Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous makes good TV but what about a series on suicides of the Rich and Famous. Drug addictions of the rich and famous. How many times have I heard testimonies from the mega-successful about the vanity of their attainments? When you set your heart to covet you are into a lose-lose proposition. May God drive this spiritual illness far from us!

Now, to the positive side of the commandment. If coveting is what we ought not do, what ought we do? What is the opposite of coveting? As I thought about this my initial answer was contentment. The opposite of coveting is contentment. And that is a biblical value isn't it? Hebrews 13:5 (ESV) *Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have,*

*for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."* There it is. The opposite of greed is contentment. And the basis of contentment is our trust in the provision of God, the God who promises to never leave us or forsake us. I can be sure I have enough of this world's goods because my Lord promises that I will. So, to build contentment in my life I want to learn and meditate in the promises of God. I also want to tune out much of what is being said in the world. One of our goals as Christian people is to learn a holy contentment in the provisions of God. I Timothy 6:**6-8** *Godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. 7 For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. 8 If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.* Maxie Dunnam said there are two ways to be rich. One is to have lots of possessions, the other is to have few needs. The former is okay but the latter is a grace we have to work on, and we are doomed to failure if our minds are saturated with the propaganda of the airwaves. What is the goal of advertising? I would not suggest that all advertising is bad. It serves an important function, but we have to realize the intention behind it which is to create a sense of need within us. Advertising is designed to engender discontentment, to convince us we need a new car, a better smart phone and more stylish clothes. And if you expose yourself to this through heavy intake of these messages you are sabotaging the work of God's Spirit in your life. Contentment is learned as we redefine our needs according to Biblical standards. I could say much more about this but I want to go on to a second and possibly more important application of the tenth commandment.

I begin with a question. Is all coveting wrong? Does God expect us to have no strong urges, no passionate desires, no powerful longings? No! Think with me here. Is it intrinsically wrong to covet or to desire something? Not at all. What is forbidden in the commandment is the coveting of material possessions or earthly things. You see, there is no call in the Scriptures for us to be passionless creatures. God wants us to go for the gusto. He wants us to be men and women of tremendous passion but He wants that passion directed in the course of righteousness. God says to be content with your material goods but what about spiritual things? Look at I Timothy 6 again. **8** *If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.* And then you have the great warning against loving money. **9-11a** *Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But flee from these things.* That is, do not desire them. Do not pursue

them. And the result is that you become a person with no ambition, no goals, no drive. Is that what we're after? God forbid. Read on in **11** *But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.* God doesn't say to be passive and content in this area of life. He calls us to covet, to crave, and to hunt down righteousness and godliness. The next verse talks about the fight of faith. There are things worth fighting to have, and striving to obtain but according to Paul what are those things? Not a better job or a nicer house, but the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Do you see this? We don't stop coveting things by stuffing our desires; we stop coveting things by altering our desires. We redirect our passions and our pursuits. Larry Crabb writes this, please follow closely: *The Scriptures consistently expose people as both thirsty and foolish. We long for the satisfaction we were built to enjoy, but we all move away from God to find it. An inside look, then, can be expected to uncover two elements imbedded deeply in our heart: (1) thirst or deep longing for what we do not have; and (2) stubborn independence reflected in wrong strategies for finding the life we desire. It is with an understanding of these two fundamental elements that we can productively explore beneath the surface of our everyday problems. The first element, deep longings, reflects our humanness and all the dignity accorded to us as bearers of God's image. We long for a quality of relationship and meaning that no other creature has the capacity to enjoy. We were designed to richly enjoy the person as God as well as His provisions. The second element, wrong strategies, exists because we are sinful. Only foolish, rebellious, proud people would move away from the source of life in search of a fulfillment they can control. And that is exactly what we've done and do.* (Inside Out p. 54-55) And the solution is what? Suppress the longings? Forget that we ache for something more? Or, do we learn to seek satisfaction in the way that God ordains?

Another great text to see this in is Colossians 3:**1** *Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.* Is that a contentment verse? No, that calls for a certain discontentment. It directs us to want more of the spiritual blessings of Christ. And to seek them. Read this aloud with me **2** *Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.* In other words, there is to be a transfer of affections, a transfer of goals. You are to no longer covet the stuff of this life, but the stuff of heaven. Verse 3 says we have died to the things of this life. Paul was able to say in Philippians 3:**8** *I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.*

The goods and riches of this world are not to be shunned, they are to be put in their place and regarded as little next to knowing Jesus. Set your mind on things above. Psalm 27:4 *One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to meditate in His temple.* John Piper has written a wonderful book entitled *Desiring God*. He advocates for what he calls *Christian hedonism*. He wants us to pursue pleasure and joy more than we ever have before. He calls us to go for the gusto but then he redefines what real gusto is. And it has nothing to do with beer. Remember the great catechism answer. What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and to what? The next word is enjoy. We are to enjoy, to have pleasure, to be happy. But what is to be the source of that happiness? Not our games and our toys. We are to glorify God and enjoy HIM forever. That is the passion that is to mark our lives, not a striving to get ahead and to get more of this world's goods, but a striving to know God more perfectly and purely, with the assurance that "in His presence is fullness of joy." Colossians 3:5 *Consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.* It says greed or coveting amounts to idolatry. Do you understand that? In week one of our series on the ten commandments, as we looked at the command to have no other gods before us, we saw that our god is that which we believe will make us happy and satisfied. When we covet something we are placing our faith in that object, we look to it for happiness and if it is anything but the Lord Himself we sin.

The application then, our response to God's word is to stop setting our minds on this world and seek the things above, pursue righteousness, passionately seek to know God. But knowing we ought to do that is not enough. You and I are wise to cultivate an appetite for God. We are wise to get around those people and things that make us want more of God. Being here is a good start. But there is more. Ask yourself this: the things you see and hear and experience - do they develop in you an appetite for God or for other stuff? What you read and what you watch and who you know will greatly affect what you want and what you pursue. Make sure they agree with God's word.

What do you covet? We all covet something. We're all after something. We all pursue what we believe will give us joy. Honestly now, what is it with you? Beth has been reading to me in recent weeks a biography of Eric Liddell entitled, *For the Glory*. Liddell was the Olympic champion runner who died early in life as a missionary in China. Most of us know him from the 1972 award winning movie *Chariots of Fire*. That film is a really great study of the difference between the pursuit of godly pleasure and ungodly coveting. You may remember from the film that

you had two men in pursuit of a gold medal in the 1924 Olympics. One was a secular Jewish man named Harold Abrahams, a man of great passion and determination. To him the gold medal was an all-consuming goal. He hired a professional trainer who looked at it the same way. These men put all they had into winning the 100 meter gold -why? It was to them a proof of their manhood, their worth as human beings. Even while he prepared for the race Abrahams began to experience the pain of disillusionment. He reflected and said, *In one hour I will raise my eyes and look down that corridor, four feet wide, with ten lonely seconds to justify my existence.* And after he won, the disillusionment set in for good. He achieved his goal but had to get drunk to handle the disappointment. And at several points in the movie he looked curiously at Eric Liddell, a man so different from himself, so at peace. Eric Liddell had within a source of joy that Abrahams knew nothing of. Like Abrahams he was a runner, but the joy for Liddell was not found in the medals and the fame and the confirmation of his worth. But Eric Liddell said, *I believe God made me for a purpose, for China, but he also made me fast. When I run I feel His pleasure.* Eric Liddell was no less a man of passion. It is just that His passions ran a different race. The way of one gives peace, and yields eternal life. The way of the other brings heartache and death. What will be your pursuit? Our closing quote from AW Tozer explains the way of Eric Liddell and King David and Paul the apostle, *The man who has God for his treasure has all things in One. Many ordinary treasures may be denied him, or if he is allowed to have them, the enjoyment of them will be so tempered that they will never be necessary to his happiness. Or if he must see them go, one after one, he will scarcely feel a sense of loss, for having the Source of all things he has in One all satisfaction, all pleasure, all delight. Whatever he may lose, he has actually lost nothing, for he now has it all in One, and he has it purely, legitimately and forever.*