**A Sermon for DaySpring**

By Eric Howell

*“You Shall Not Covet”*

Exodus 20:17

March 4, 2018

The Ten Commandments open with “I am the Lord your God; you shall have no gods before me.” The Ten Commandments end with a command not to covet other people’s stuff. To really live the first one, which seems vitally important, we need to live the last one, which sometimes gets overlooked. As different as these two sound, they both, in speaking to the desires of the human heart, create a people whose love of God and love of neighbor are made pure.

To receive the gift of the tenth commandment, a working definition of covet would be helpful. Unlike some of the other commandments which are clearer, covet eludes a precise definition. That is partly because the word in Hebrew, *chamad,* isn’t always a bad thing. It can mean delight or pleasure, and delight often is a wonderful thing to be nurtured, not a bad thing to be avoided. But sometimes, *chamad* does mean something dangerous. It’s the gleam in Eve’s eye in the Garden when she looked at the forbidden tree and desired its fruit.

And so we see that even if we can have a precise, helpful definition, how do we measure such a thing as desire to know whether it is okay or not? If we can agree on the word adultery, we kind of know what it means when adultery has been committed. If we can agree on the word murder, we pretty much know what it means when it’s happened. That’s not to say there aren’t challenges with each of those . . . adultery, murder, Sabbath keeping.

Centuries of study and reflection on these words produced long lists of laws intended to clarify these core commands. Hundreds of Jewish laws were created to help people know what it means to honor the Sabbath, for example. People of faith have worked diligently and thoughtfully for centuries to understand how to live out these commandments. It’s silly to think that you can nail the Ten Commandments to a courthouse wall and solve anything. These commandments are invitations to a way of life in relationship with God, not just rules to be imposed.

The last one, the one about coveting, is a really good example of this. On first glance it sounds pretty straightforward. The cowboy version simply says, “Don’t be hankering for your buddies’ stuff.” That’s not a bad start. But what does that mean? What does hankering mean? How do I know when I’ve gone from appreciating and liking something to wanting something, to hankering for it in a way that would be violating the tenth commandment?

And that shows what is so challenging about this. You can see stealing, adultery, bearing false witness. You can’t see or measure hankering. The other commandments are about external actions. But what is the outward manifestation of coveting? How do you know if you’re doing it?

This is especially challenging in a culture like ours that is saturated with messages designed to fan the flame of desire. You can hardly get away from commercials calculated to cause us to desire what we didn’t even know we needed or wanted until we saw it. The engine of our economy is consumer spending. Consumer spending in an era of easy credit is less a function of how much we have to spend and more a measure of how much we are willing to spend on what we are made to desire. Dave Ramsey puts our predicament really well: “We buy things we don’t need with money we don’t have to impress people we don’t like.” We’re a mess aren’t we?

Changing the economic system, if such a thing were possible, wouldn’t solve the problem. Stanley Hauerwas quips, “The socialist calls capitalism ‘legalized greed’ and the capitalist calls socialism ‘legalized envy’ and both have truth in what they say. Social systems based upon schemes for organizing people like us will inevitably be institutionalized resistance to [the commandment against coveting].” (*The Truth* *About God*, 132)

A working definition of coveting is “disordered desire.” It’s not only when you want the wrong thing. It’s when you want the wrong thing for the wrong reasons, and even when you want the right thing for the wrong reasons. Or when you want something that is neither right nor wrong in itself, but you want it in the wrong way. That’s when you’ve gone to hankering.

For them back then it was a disordered desire for a neighbor’s house, wife, servants, ox, donkey, or anything else. For us, it’s probably not so different, disordered desire for our neighbor’s house, family life, job status, car, or anything else. The “or anything else” means the soul-searching we are called to do is endless. There’s no specific limit to what is included here. It’s all included. Do not covet your neighbor’s anything. Do not have disordered desire in your heart.

But what does that mean? Is there such a thing as rightly ordered desire? The Christian tradition is skeptical of even this, knowing how our hearts are vulnerable to disorder. We’re taught as Christians to be detached from our desires and our possessions. We’re not just detached from what someone else has. We’re detached even from what I already have. Do not covet even your own stuff. Be willing to let even that go.

It is when you can say, with the Apostle Paul, “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (4.11)

I appreciate one little word in the Apostle’s confession -- “learned.” I have “learned.” Detached contentment didn’t come naturally to such a competitive, driven person as he was. For Paul, it wasn’t creature comforts that drove him, but it seemed to be the desire to win, to control, to destroy his opposition. That’s woven into Paul’s personality. And so, what a testimony, that he is able to give witness to the good work of God in him, that his joy and identity isn’t from what he’s accomplished, consumed, or achieved, but in trust in whatever circumstances. His eyes are set higher, and so life becomes simpler, and love for God purer.

He can say, “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.” The fruit of this is the contentment we have in whatever life brings our way.

But this is hard. Truly. Coveting is not a way of life we opt into by willful disobedience. In our culture especially, coveting is a way of life you have to resist willfully. Disordered desire, lust, envy, greed, consumption, believing that true happiness is elusive unless you can have that one more thing -- this is who we are. It’s all around us and within us. Unless you are truly attending, in prayer and humility, to the tenth commandment, it will become part of your life and then take it over.

Again, from Hauerwas: “Here in the last commandment we discover what [all the Commandments are] about—namely, that we were created to love God, and when that love is misdirected, life degenerates into a jumble of disordered desires, fragments testifying that we were meant to be something quite else than what we have become.” (130)

I’m aware of some folks, some perfectly nice folks, that come to mind who are all but defined by their desires. There’s always a next thing to buy. Always one more thing to consume. Satisfaction in what they already have is fleeting. It’s always the next thing that is on their minds. You get the sense after a while that it’s not the actual consumption of the things that brings them happiness, but the accommodation of desire. It’s the actual desire, the thrill of the desire, that is the desire. So what they have come to love is not joy, not enjoyment in the things, or the things themselves, but desire itself. Desire is not just a part of their lives; it is their lives.

The thing is that I could either be talking about specific people I know, or I could be talking about any of us. This story is true about our whole way of life, whether we are rich or poor, have a lot or have a little. We are absolutely tempted all the time to let desire be the fuel in our engines. Rich Mullins wrote, “Everybody I know says they need just one thing. And what they really mean is that they need just one thing more.”

Joan Chittester relates a story that’s helpful here. The story tells of an exhausted American businessman who traveled to a faraway island for a vacation. Every day he went to the beach to swim, and every day he watched a local native man there slowly cleaning fish in his little boat.

After studying him a few days, the businessman swam over and asked him, “Do you catch fish every day?” “Oh yes,” the local said, “plenty of fish here.” The visitor asked, “How often do you fish?” “I fish every morning.”

“But what do you do then the rest of the day?” the business man asked, thinking how different this man’s life was from his full days back home from morning to night working at the office, and he began to smell a business opportunity. The man said, thinking about the odd question, “First I clean the fish for supper, then I take a little siesta, then I build a bit of my house, then I eat with my family, and then, for the rest of the night, I play my guitar, visit with my friends, and drink my homemade wine.

“Wow.” The businessman’s eyes gleamed. “Don’t you see, if you fished all day you could sell your fish, buy a bigger boat, hire helpers, can, pack, and sell your fish all over the world, and make a lot of money.”

“What would I do with it?”

“Well,” the businessman said, thinking about the odd question, “you could buy a house, quit working, enjoy your family, take big vacations, party with your friends for the rest of your life!”

“Well, mister, that sounds like what I’m doing now and I only have to catch one fish a day to do it.”

You don’t have to have everything to have everything you need. The sacred word against coveting, the final word in the Ten Commandments is keen insight into broken human nature. Our desires are not only disordered, we don’t even know what rightly ordered desires hardly are anymore, without a lot of help.

That’s the wisdom of the commandments. They are just the kind of help we need, as we see now the wisdom of coveting as the last commandment that is measured by all the others:

If your desire leads you to tell a lie to get it

If your desire leads you to steal, or toward adultery, or to murder

If your desire makes you dishonor those who have made life possible for you, your fathers and your mothers

If your desires do not allow you to honor time for God and rest for those around you

If your desires use the name of God like a mascot or a slogan

If your desires lead your eyes away to shiny things before which you bow down your life

If your desires put anything else, including yourself, before God, whom you are not, your desires are disordered and you are being called back to the holy love of God.

This is entirely a gift of grace that God has given to us: a language that helps us attend to our innermost, even hidden, motivations. The temptation always is not to love God and neighbor, but to love ourselves and to use God and neighbor to love ourselves even more.

And so we pray for God’s help, in the secret innermost heart, that God would search our hearts and lead us in the way everlasting, the way of righteousness and freedom and pure love for one another and for our God. For his sake and for the sake of the Gospel. Amen.

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