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The Ten Commandments: A Ten Part Study of the Decalogue
Part 10 - Don't Covet! - Exodus 20: 17

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The past several months in this column we have examined the Ten Commandments, perhaps the best known legal and moral code ever conceived. We know, of course, that they were revealed to Moses on Mount Horeb during the time of the Exodus from Egypt. They formed, and still form, the basic moral standard for the Judeo-Christian worldview.

To read the previous installments on the other nine commandments go to this link: <http://www.marketfaith.org/2018/11/the-10-commandments>

In this tenth and final installment we consider Commandment Ten:

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."

In the seventh installment we analyzed the Seventh Commandment, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). In Part 8, Commandment Eight, we focused on the order, "You shall not steal!" (Exodus 20:15). In this part ten, we will see how God, in a sense, coalesced both of those two behavioral sinful activities into a single principle of moral thought. It is the same principle that Jesus used to describe the real source of mankind's sin.

The key to this divine principle is that sin has its roots in our minds and hearts. Both adultery (Exodus 20:14) and stealing (Exodus 20:15) are products of our desires for those things which we have

no right to possess. The Tenth Commandment uses the verb "covet" to indicate such illegitimate longings. The word covet is the Hebrew verb *tahmod*, meaning "to desire" or "take pleasure in." It is closely related to the New Testament term *epithumeo* meaning "covet, desire, would fain, or lust (after)."

Note that the subject of the prohibitions are those things that rightly belong to "your neighbor." That is the Hebrew *reeka* meaning "companion," "comrade," or "fellow." It needs to be understood to include anyone with whom we associate in life. Jesus used the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate this term (Luke 10:25-37). Now that does not mean we should not covet only those things that belong to our friendly associates. It means we should not covet anything that belongs to anyone else.

The commandment specifies several things that are off-limits for covetousness. First, it says not to "covet your neighbor's house." A house represents the totality of a person's life and family. To want the home where someone else and his family resides is immorally to invade their legitimate living space. This does not mean we cannot admire another person's home and even want one like it if we can. But to try and appropriate someone else's domicile in deceitful or unethical ways is wrong.

Second, the command says, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife." This case reminds us of Jesus' statement that lust for someone's spouse is tantamount to adultery. It starts in the mind and grows into immoral behavior. We observed in our study of Commandment Seven, "You shall not commit adultery," how Jesus, in

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reply to a pointed question about adultery, said:

27 "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; 28 but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matthew 5:27-28).

The commandment then expands the scope of this principle to include the human resources of one's neighbor. It says not to covet "his male servant or his female servant." In ancient times it was the norm for a household to include the husband, wife, and children, but also their servants or slaves. We might compare them to the human resources of a person's business or family. It is wrong to desire to lure away those people in ways that are unethical, devious, or illegitimate.

This also applies to nonhuman resources such as livestock or work animals. It says not to covet "his ox or his donkey." So you should never want to steal your next door neighbor's oxen and donkeys! They do have them don't they? Obviously, not many of us today still possess oxen or donkeys. Nonetheless, farmers still have livestock and many people own horses, dogs, cats, and other animals. You get the point.

Finally, the commandment sums it all up in by saying not to covet "anything that belongs to your neighbor." It does not get any more all encompassing than that. We simply should never want anything that belongs to someone else that is not rightfully ours to possess!

For Christians we should look to God to provide for all our needs, but not necessarily for all our wants. If we depend on Him we have no reason to desire the things that others may own. We should learn to be

satisfied with what we have in accordance with God's will for our lives. The first step in seeking something we legitimately may desire is to pray about it. God may or may not allow us to obtain it. In any case, we should be satisfied with what He provides.

Conclusion

This concludes the ten part series on the Ten Commandments. Hopefully they have given you some new or expanded insight into those great moral absolutes. Those principles established for humanity a basic standard of morality and ethics that still stand today. No other statements so succinctly and eloquently summarize the expectations of God for His people. They should stand as a fundamental guide for our personal behavior and as the basis for civil law as well. As Jesus Himself said:

"For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter (iota) or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished." (Matthew 5:18 NASB)

But keep in mind what Jesus also said was the most important two principles revealed in the Law.

"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:36-40 NASB)

We must remember, however, the primary reason the Law was given to us in the first place. It was revealed so that we might comprehend the scope of our sinfulness before the Holy God. Paul explains it this way using the illustration of a teacher:

Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. But now that

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faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. (Galatians 3:24-25 NASB)

Paul, however, also makes it clear that even the Gentiles, who did not receive the Law, were still conscious of right and wrong and of their innate sinfulness.

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. (Romans 1:20 NASB)

For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing

witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus. (Romans 2:14-16 NASB)

That being said, the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Old Testament Law also point us to the salvation that we can receive through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If we are willing to repent and confess our sins to God, He will, by grace through faith, forgive us and grant us a personal relationship with Him.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB)

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