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Exodus 20:17

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THE TENTH COMMANDMENT: DEEPENING DESIRE

SERIES: HEARING GOD'S VOICE

Advent evokes a myriad of different emotions for me. There is much to look forward to with great anticipation. I love rekindling the world of imagination that surrounds a season deeply laden with amazement and awe. Israel had waited so many centuries for God to come and save her, and now that moment had arrived. But the way in which he came and to whom he appeared was so different than anyone had expected that the term “wonder” is the only way to describe it. Advent is also a season of extraordinary music. Inspired carol writers have given voice to some of the most profound lyrics of all time. If the angels sang in holy awe at Jesus’ birth, it is only appropriate that the church has joined the chorus with its best musical creations.

The birth of the infant Jesus to Mary and Joseph also typifies the season as a special time for families, since birth gives shape to every family. Families stand central at this time of year. I especially enjoy re-enacting our unique family traditions. Some of them might appear childlike to the casual observer, but they are inviolable nonetheless. There is the extraordinary tale of Blue Mouse and his wife Blue Miss that I conjured up when I was nineteen and later canonized in some of my love letters to my wife Emily. Sparing you the details, it will suffice to say that Blue Mouse takes his assigned place under our tree each year. Then there is the ritual of placing the first ornament on the tree. That honor is reserved for Snoopy, who is dressed up like a reindeer. Many other rituals continue throughout the holiday season right up to reading the Christmas story on Christmas Eve and into the morning of Christmas Day, when on this one morning of the year, dad dictates when and what we eat.

But I must confess that despite these wonderful aspects of Christmas, I also approach the season with a little dread. Advent is the one holiday of the year that the world has taken hostage, attempting to leech out of it all that is sacred. The three wise men who came with gifts to honor the King are transformed into a Toys “R” Us Santa Claus, that multi-billionaire elf employer who lives to satisfy every child’s dreams and expectations. There is no time of the year like Christmas. We feel an inexorable pressure to meet the expectations of everyone we know, and even some we don’t know, with a tangible gift. And it has to be the right gift, especially for the in-laws. Then there are the relational expectations. Under the guise of “peace on earth and good will toward men,” we are expected to be at every significant social gathering whether family, school or work related. So we sing “Silent Night” at a time when silence is rare and our nights are more often characterized by exhaustion than “sleep in heavenly peace.”

But there is good news! By the grace of God, the timing of our study of the tenth commandment falls at the beginning of Advent. So we will examine the command, “You shall not covet,” at a time when the world’s tidal wave of consumerism is about to reach its peak and swallow us whole.

We will look first at the commandment in its original context; then we will examine the cures for covetousness; and finally, the radical edge which Jesus gave this commandment in the New Covenant. I must warn you that this last section is not for the weak of heart.

I. The Commandment in Context (Exod 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.”
(Exod 20:17 NASB)

The tenth commandment is a dramatic conclusion to the Decalogue. Closely tied to the first, it identifies the desires of our heart as the internal gateway that opens the breach in all our covenant relationships. Bruce Waltke defines the term “covet” (Heb *chamad*) as “the heart’s spontaneous desire for what is lovely or desirable”—but which belongs to someone else: “The command is uniquely and emphatically repeated twice: It begins with a specific list of what the heart typically covets (houses and the opposite sex), and then a general prohibition.”¹

All of our actions, good or bad, find their source in the desires of the heart. Therefore in God’s eyes we have not truly embraced the Ten Commandments until we judge the intentions and motives of our hearts. Fretheim writes: “True obedience involves avoiding not only certain actions but also intentions or attitudes toward others in relationship, perhaps best captured in such words as envy or greed or lust. Covetousness has a way of breeding discontent and easily leads to abuse and crime; it is a basic source of social disorder and trouble in interpersonal relationships. It betrays a deep dissatisfaction with that which one has been given.”²

Whereas idolatry seeks the life that God offers, but does so by bypassing the relationship that he gives, covetousness is worse. Covetousness seeks life in what belongs to another, and if sufficiently strong will harm the other person to acquire it. As in all these latter commandments, the operative word is “neighbor,” which is emphatically repeated three times. Even when it comes to coveting, sin is defined as a breach in covenant relationships. In Micah’s day, the prophet condemned the powerfully rich who, having formulated their dreams of prosperity, broke the eighth commandment by stealing what belonged to the poor. Such theft was not only a breach of covenant to the present generation but also future generations who were thereby robbed of their inheritance:

**Woe to those who scheme iniquity,
Who work out evil on their beds!
When morning comes, they do it,
For it is in the power of their hands.
They covet fields and then seize them,
And houses, and take them away.
They rob a man and his house,
A man and his inheritance. (Mic 2:1-2)**

In Amos' day, unchecked coveting fostered such relentless appetites among the rich that every possible kind of theft was practiced at the expense of the poor, along with the desecration of the Sabbath, and with it the gift of rest that God had decreed for the whole creation:

Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away with the humble of the land, saying,

“When will the new moon be over,
So that we may sell grain,
And the sabbath, that we may open the wheat market,
To make the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger,
And to cheat with dishonest scales,
So as to buy the helpless for money
And the needy for a pair of sandals,
And that we may sell the refuse of the wheat?” (Amos 8:4-6)

Durham summarizes the effects of coveting in Jeremiah's day: “The citizens of Judah in Jeremiah's time, deifying their desires and longing after material and local security, violated the first, third, sixth, seventh, and ninth commandments, and above all, by making Yahweh's temple into a fetish, the second commandment as well (Jer 7:1-15).”³

In our culture of affluence, marketers prey on consumers to increase their appetites beyond what is even reasonable to consume. For several weeks prior to Christmas we receive in the mail scores of unsolicited catalogues of things we don't need. As a culture “we find it increasingly difficult to maintain any sense of balance regarding our use of food; gadgets for home, office, our auto; clothing; entertainments done in our behalf as we look on; or recreational goods and equipment.”⁴ Marketers know that the key to awakening desire in the consumer to buy a product is not based on whether one needs it, but whether someone else might buy it at a cheaper price. Putting a limited item on sale for a specified time guarantees pandemonium at the mall.

The great tragedy in all this is that, as our insatiable appetites drive us to keep pace with the Joneses, it is the poor who are overlooked, dismissed and trodden upon. But fortunately, God in his grace has always held open the doorway to true wealth for those with humble hearts.

What then were the cures to a life of covetousness that God offered Israel? Let me make mention of three.

II. The Cures for Covetousness

A. Maintaining divinely mandated rhythms

Earlier in Exodus we saw that Israel's experience of the wilderness was designed by God to reshape her appetites through the gift of manna and Sabbath keeping. In a land not sown, Israel learned that she could totally trust God to provide her daily bread, and on the day prior to the Sabbath she could enter into complete rest, as God would provide not one, but two daily portions of manna. As God literally forced them to maintain a divine rhythm of rest one day a week, Israel was being trained in the art of anxiety-free living. In this way the wilderness was a blessing. It purged Israel of covetous appetites, for everyone had enough provision, and as one family, all were learning to exercise childlike faith. After Israel entered the Promised Land she was exhorted by God to stay close to this experience in her memory:

“You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.” (Deut 8:2-3)

Perhaps like Israel we should be ever mindful to thank God for our wilderness experiences, times when we have been stripped of our creature comforts and have to trust God for our basic necessities of survival, like health, a job, or a restored marriage. Nothing shocks me out of covetousness and evil imaginations like a visit to the hospital. When lives are at stake, when a father weeps for his daughter, or a wife clings to her husband, or children have to say goodbye to a parent, the weight of holy affections melts earthly desires like wax over fire.

To further encourage Israel in this lifestyle of trust, God promised that during each of her three pilgrimages he would supernaturally secure their land from outside threat, so that every male could appear before God at the temple in Jerusalem without anxiety or fear that his land might be threatened:

“For I will drive out nations before you and enlarge your borders, and no man shall covet your land when you go up three times a year to appear before the LORD your God.” (Exod 34:24)

This is the “divine anti-coveting protection pact” which God makes with those who choose not to run the rat race seven days a week but take time out with their families to honor God on holy days (for Israel this was the Sabbath), and during sacred seasons (there were seven sacred seasons). In summary, the first step to cure us from covetous living is to be rigorous in maintaining divinely mandated rhythms in our lives, whether daily Bible readings, mid-week discipleship groups, weekly worship or sacred seasons that are set aside for worship.

B. Making no provision for the flesh

The second step to conquering covetousness is to prepare for the battle before it begins. Though we cannot control the spontaneous desires we experience, we are responsible for what we do with them. Temptation is inevitable to all of us every day of the week. But more often than not the strength of temptation is governed by how we have fed or nurtured wrong desire by our past choices. The strength of temptation is greatly enhanced by memories of indulgence that fortify desire into a stronghold of habit. So the second step in the cure to covetousness is to set up an impregnable barrier over the gateways of our hearts. When the father of Proverbs trains his son in the skill of sexual purity by avoiding the lure of adultery, he makes no mistake about “the bottom line”:

Do not let your heart turn aside to her ways,
Do not stray into her paths. (Prov 7:25)

The father is a keen observer. He is a seasoned veteran who knows about the seductive power of lust which, once aroused, is so intoxicating it can drag its victims to places they never dreamed of going, including the very doorway of death (Prov 5:5; Jas 1:14-15). Therefore the son must be diligent to guard the gateways to his heart, for once it has been taken captive, the feet soon follow. In Proverbs 6,

the father identifies this sacred gateway that his son must diligently fortify:

**Do not desire her beauty in your heart,
Nor let her capture you with her eyelids. (Prov 6:25)**

Waltke's comments on this verse are enlightening: "The parallelism between 'do not covet her beauty' and 'and do not let her capture you with her eyes' suggests that coveting begins by allowing eye contact. Desiring comes into his heart through optical stimulation aroused by 'her beauty,' and more specifically by 'the pupils of her eyes,' followed by her sweet talk."⁵

Because the heart is quick to follow the eyes, Job's covenant of purity serves as an inspiration to all men:

**I have made a covenant with my eyes;
How then could I gaze at a virgin? (Job 31:1)**

Given the fact that men are extremely vulnerable by what they "see," a helpful step in the process of purifying our desires would be if every home would engage in an honest and healthy conversation regarding the onslaught of temptation that we face in today's pornographic explosion on the Internet and television. In earlier days, men had to go on a diligent search for their imaginative prostitutes and it was difficult to do so undetected, but now every home and hotel room is hard-wired with instant access to things no one should see. Heightening the temptation, this access is certified by the devil with the empty promise of no exposure, and therefore no consequences. Yet the shame that follows transforms once healthy, robust men into isolated cripples who lose their ability to engage in healthy relationships.

As a pastoral comment, let me suggest an attitude that might be helpful for healing in the midst of this crisis. On that historic date of 9/11 when terrorists aimed their entire arsenal on the twin towers in New York, no one was surprised at the toll of the victims in those buildings. Almost everyone inside was somehow affected by the deadly impact of those aircraft and the subsequent collapse of the twin towers. Seeing the devastation, the world ran right into the fray to offer emergency aid, hoping that somebody might have survived. What amazed us that day was not the death toll, but rather the miraculous stories of survival. In like manner, our vile enemy, the devil, has exponentially increased his explosive arsenal and taken direct aim at the twin towers of every man's soul worldwide. Seeing the devastation, we can assume most men have been affected by either a direct hit or falling debris. Rather than living in denial, as if there was no threat, or condemning the victims, we ought to run right into the fray to offer emergency aid and relief to restore men to their true humanity.

Women are not exempt either. Though aroused more by touch than sight, women can be made to feel insecure by images they see and how they perceive themselves through a satanic device called "comparison." Here covetousness works powerfully within the vulnerable female psyche to cause women to long for a different image that might bring them love and acceptance. Here the standard is the 22-year-old, 5' 8", 110 lb Victoria's Secret model who walks a runway with little knowledge of the evil discontent she is perpetuating on her victims. As she collects her handsome paycheck, countless young girls are battling bulimia. It should come as no surprise to us why "makeovers" are so popular in today's sensual world.

It is very enlightening that in the Song of Solomon, the first image that Shulammitte employs to reveal her identity to her lover is

one that expresses an uncomfortable self-consciousness about her physical appearance. In vulnerable tones she says, "Do not stare at me, for the sun has caught sight of me." She adds that she hopes a godly man will look past this flaw and get to know her on a deeper level: "I am black but lovely" (Cant 1:5-6). Though men and women are "wired" differently, both must diligently set a guard over their eyes, aware that the devil knows how to tyrannize both sexes with covetous imaginations through what we see.

Jesus declared that being ruthless with what we see is a matter of life or death: "If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell" (Matt 18:9). And Paul encourages us to think well in advance of the dangers that lure us so we "make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts" (Rom 13:14). As someone has well said, "If we do not take measures ahead of time not to sin, we are in essence, making provision to sin."

C. Cultivating Holy Affections

But purity and holy living cannot be sustained by avoidance alone. Some say a good defense wins football games, but spiritually speaking, the best defense is a relentless offense that never leaves the field! The only way to ultimately conquer a covetous spirit is to go on the offensive and cultivate deeper desires. When we focus our desires on the things that belong to a neighbor, whether status, vacation home, wife or Mercedes, we kill ourselves on two counts. First, we torment ourselves with the frustration of wanting what we cannot have; and second, we shut our souls off from the life of heaven itself. Covetousness shrinks our horizons to the three dimensions of the material world.

So the advice of Scripture is to forget material things altogether and cultivate the holy affections of heaven which enliven the soul beyond measure. Perhaps this is why David uses the operative term "desire" ("more desirable") to compare the eternal riches he discovered by meditating in God's word with the limited value of material wealth. After exploring the immense wonder of God's teaching, testimonies, precepts, commandments and judgments, he reflects that,

**They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.
(Ps 19:10)**

The irony is that these heavenly riches did not become accessible to David until he had become a homeless fugitive. If anyone could have been dominated and tyrannized by covetousness it should have been David. He rightfully deserved everything that Saul possessed: a palace, a wife, a standing army, wealth, authority, and the supreme title of king. But like his forefathers, David found the wilderness to be a source of revelation and life that deepened his love for God and far surpassed any material possession. This is when holy affections begin to take root in the soul. When you realize that nothing on earth can threaten your access to eternal life you begin to live a life that is anxiety free, which in turn gives you the capacity to love others, even those who used to threaten you. Twice David had the opportunity to kill his enemy, but instead of returning evil for evil he was able to both forgive him and demonstrate affection towards him. Instead of coveting what belongs to our neighbor, we rejoice in everything that God has given him because we love him.

But even after we have loved our enemy we can never become complacent. Jesus, in typical fashion, takes the commandment to yet another level.

III. Jesus' Radical Edge to the Commandment (Mark 10:17-30)

The radical edge of the tenth commandment comes into full view in the gospel of Mark when a rich man comes to Jesus with the question, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:17). Jesus answers by quoting the commandments (6-10, 5) that deal with his responsibilities to his neighbor. The man responds with the relief of a student who had just aced his exam: "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up" (10:20). Unfortunately for the man, he is ill prepared for his grade:

Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." (10:21)

With a penetrating look of love in his eyes, Jesus answers that the man lacks just one thing, but that one thing is everything. He is an absolute failure. His money had stolen his affections away from God. Coveting things had shut him out from the life of heaven. So Jesus offers him the invitation to a discipleship that will give him his share in the age to come: He has to sell everything and follow Jesus. As radical as this demand to "sell all" sounds to us, it would have had an even sharper edge to Jews, whose most basic possession was land. One never parted with ancestral land in Israel. Maintaining land meant securing your rights to inheritance and your continuity as the people of God. Now Jesus asks him to walk away from it all and follow him. Here is the radical edge that Jesus brings to the commandment. The old covenant demanded that we not covet our neighbor's family or property; the new commandment demands that we walk away from our loyalty to family and property and follow Jesus.

But the demand is much too much for this rich man to consider. He walks away, grieved in spirit. As a cloud of sadness fills the air, Jesus turns to his disciples and says this man is not an isolated case, but represents all who are wealthy:

And Jesus, looking around, said to His disciples, "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!" The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!" (10:23-24)

This statement shocks the disciples. Most Jews assumed from the teaching of Deuteronomy and some of the Psalms that wealth was a symbol of God's blessing, and if anyone had a share in the age to come it had to be the rich. Then Jesus draws them into the imaginative world of impossibility:

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (10:25)

Here is a camel, whose height, awkward gait and heavy burdens give cause for a humorous display as the beast attempts to negotiate the narrow openings around Jerusalem. Now by means of hyperbole, Jesus asks his disciples to imagine that same camel passing through the eye of a needle. What is impossible for the camel is more than impossible for the rich.

They were even more astonished and said to Him, "Then who can be saved?" Looking at them, Jesus said, "With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God." (10:26-27)

Reflecting on the image of the camel and all things possible, C. S. Lewis penned a poem:

All things are possible, it's true.
But picture how the camel feels, squeezed out
In one bloody thread from tail to snout.⁶

For God all things are possible. God can take rich, self-assured individuals and cause them to have the faith to forsake property and family to follow Jesus. Hearing these words, the light begins to dawn on the disciples. God had already worked that very miracle on their hearts. Peter and Andrew left their fishing nets to follow Jesus. James and John left their father and the family business. Matthew left his profitable tax collector's booth. They had given up their loyalty to family and property to follow Jesus. That being the case, can they confidently expect to receive their share of eternal life in the age to come?

Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life." (10:29-30)

Jesus carefully points out to them that they won't have to wait until they die to enjoy their inheritance. The future was already invading the present. Whatever they left to follow Jesus they shall receive back, not when they get to heaven, but now, and exponentially more, a hundred times more! Everything for which the world strives and covets would now be theirs as a gift. In this way, coveting has no place in the followers of Jesus, for in forsaking family and property we possess all things. And this is just the first taste of eternal life!

May this radical view of the commandment grant you a fresh measure of eternal life this Advent season.

1. Bruce K. Waltke, "Gift of the Old Covenant," *An Exegetical Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

2. Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 238.

3. John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987), 298.

4. W. Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 153; quoted by Fretheim, *Exodus*, 238.

5. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs* (2 vols.; NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 1:354.

6. C. S. Lewis, *Poems* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 134.