



BOUNDARIES OF THE SOUL

SERIES: RESTORING THE ANCIENT BOUNDARIES

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Eighth Message
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As we conclude our series in the Ten Commandments this morning, I must say I have thoroughly enjoyed hearing the different styles and perspectives of the men who have spoken from the Scriptures and from their lives over the last couple of months. We have learned that the ancient ethical boundaries given to man by God are worthy of our deepest respect; they are a marvelous picture of the character of our Holy Father.

In this series we have seen that God seeks us out in the midst of our failure, rebellion and pain, calling us back to a life of deep joy within the confines of his protective boundaries. But God's call demands that we face death, and make an ultimate choice. At the conclusion of this message, before we share communion together, I will ask you to make that choice.

So we have two tasks this morning. We will try to understand what the commandment against coveting means for us today; and we will try to answer the question, What is the purpose of the Ten Commandments? Or, to put this another way, we will ask the question the apostle Paul asks in the New Testament, Why did God give the Law?

Desiring What Belongs To My Neighbor

Once again, the commandment is presented very simply. Exodus 20:17:

Thou shalt not covet. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.

I call this commandment simple in the sense that it is straightforward and clear. But it is deceptively simple. This is the commandment that brought Paul to his knees before Jesus Christ. If we understand it clearly, we will find in it a great terror and a great hope.

Let's spend a few moments gaining a better understanding of this commandment in its ancient context so that we can rightly apply it to ourselves today. The tenth commandment, as it was originally given, focused on the desires and lusts that led to the theft of a neighbor's property, the violation of his emotional life and deepest relationships, and the destruction of his ability to earn a living. The specific prohibitions in the commandment covered a broad range, especially in the context of the ancient world. Then, a man's house was a very important asset, as it is today. A man's wife was his most precious relationship. But when God added servants and animals to the list, he was not making trivial additions. In the ancient world, these were the things that gave a man his economic opportunity and, to some degree, his social standing.

So the commandment, although straightforward, applies to many things: we are not to desire, scheme after, envy, or be consumed by the things that belong to our neighbor. We are to respect our neighbor and his property, his right to earn a living, his emotional life, and so on. The Tenth Commandment pierces us deeply, because it focuses on what is going on in our hearts and minds, where God alone fully knows us.

There is one other confusion about this commandment, which stems from the English tradition of translating the Old Testament. To us, the word "covet" has negative connotations. But these are not present in Hebrew. The word "desire," which for us has much less negative baggage associated with it, is an equally

valid translation of the Hebrew. Exodus 20:17 could say:

Thou shalt not desire. You shall not desire your neighbor's house; you shall not desire your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.

To Covet Or Not To Covet?

Christians are not Buddhists. We do not believe that the way to handle desire is to eliminate it from our lives. In fact, the very Hebrew word that is translated "covet" in the Tenth Commandment is used in some Old Testament verses to show that God himself covets. David says in Psalm 68:16 that God "coveted" Mount Zion as a place for his Temple, and the prophet chides the surrounding mountains for being jealous of Mount Zion:

Why do you look with envy, O mountains with many peaks, At the mountain which God has desired for His abode?

It is the same word in Hebrew: God has desired, that is, coveted, after Mount Zion.

A most revealing Old Testament usage of the Hebrew word for "covet" is found in Genesis. When God made the Garden of Eden, he made trees that Adam and Eve were to covet. Gen. 2:9:

And out of the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The word used for "pleasing" is the same Hebrew word that the Tenth Commandment uses for "covet." God made those trees desirable and wonderful. He wanted Adam and Eve to love and care for them. But he also made another tree. Though it too was lovely, it was not an appropriate object of desire for Adam and Eve. It was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. So, we can see that God does want to use that part of us that desires: He uses it to motivate and strengthen us. But he also insists on limits to our desires.

We know what happened next. But some of you may not know the role that coveting played in the tragic story of the fall of man. Eve was enticed by the serpent, and she began to see the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in a new way. Here is what Genesis 3:6 says:

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

The tree was "desirable" to make one wise. Or, as the Hebrew makes plain, Eve began to "covet" it. She crossed the line. She began to treat this special tree as if it were in the same category as all the other desirable trees that God had made.

Things haven't changed since that tragic moment, have they? We do the same thing today. When we are confronted by a desire to possess something that is forbidden to us, we re-categorize the object of our desire. We move it from the forbidden list and create an excuse or rationalization that allows us to put it on the acceptable list. This is the logic behind the child's statement: "Well, Suzie got to have one," or, "Johnny got to do that." The event or object has been re-categorized in the mind, so the coveting becomes all right.

We do the same thing as adults—only we are not quite as ob-

vious about it. I was standing in line to get on a plane a few days ago, and the person at the gate said that first class passengers and those with little children could get on board. Then the call came for those with back row seats to board. Soon it became clear to me that everyone was getting on board. I heaved a couple of obvious sighs, looked appropriately impatient and exasperated, and then charged ahead too. I wanted to make sure that I got my seat (they might have double-booked some of them), and that I could conveniently put my carry-on luggage where I wanted. What was my justification for breaking the rule? Everybody else was getting on board, and I didn't want to be inconvenienced.

Watch people driving sometime. Better yet, watch yourself. You will see some big-time coveting for those little strips of space on the pavement that allow us to get to the next red light five seconds before the poor guy we just cut in front of. We are saying, "This space is mine. I was here first. You can't butt in." I call this process "re-categorize and rationalize." Thanks to Adam and Eve, it is at the very root of our sin nature, and every person listening to me is an expert at it.

The New Testament, as we would expect, follows the same path as the Old Testament on this subject. It is not desire in and of itself that is the problem; it is the object or source of the desire that determines its moral character. The closest Greek counterpart to the Hebrew word for covet means simply, "desire." If we use "covet" instead of "earnestly desire" to translate Luke 22:15, Jesus told his disciples that he "coveted with great covetousness to eat the Passover" with them before going to the cross.

Ultimately, I am convinced that coveting means desiring anything more fervently than desiring the Kingdom of God. I accept this definition for coveting because I think that is how Jesus and Paul understood it. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus quoted several of the Ten Commandments, correcting the legalistic turn they had taken in the hands of the Pharisees. He referred to some of the commandments without quoting them. I think this is what he was doing in the long section of the Sermon on the Mount, which ends with these famous words:

"Therefore, do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your Heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

If we truly understood these words, and really believed that a loving God stands behind them, then I could end this message right now. But we don't believe what Jesus says here. We think we need to fend for ourselves, and so we live lives marred by coveting everything *but* the kingdom of God.

In Romans 7, Paul also indicates that coveting seems to underlie all other kinds of sin. So let us look at the logic of Romans 7 more closely. This is a complex and difficult passage; I certainly don't understand all of it. But there are some parts that are clear. One is that sin is given life and strength by the law—enough life and strength to kill. Romans 7:7-8:

I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind.

When Paul delved into this commandment, he was struck by the awful power of sin in his heart. Instead of being able to say, "I don't desire what belongs to my neighbor; I am OK in this area," Paul found himself reeling in shock at the variety of evil he found there. "Coveting of every kind" was what he found inside himself as his appreciation of the holiness of God's law sharpened his spiritual eyes.

Let's summarize. The commandment, "Thou shalt not covet," must not be understood as a prohibition against desire in and of itself. Rather, it prohibits those emotions, thoughts, plans, dreams and inner promptings that lead us to want to have things which belong to someone else. Jesus and Paul show us that desir-

ing anything as a substitute for the role that only God plays in our hearts is also wrong. "Thou shalt not covet" means, "Thou shalt not desire anything above the Kingdom of God."

Three Modern Lusts

In our world today I see three areas to which this commandment speaks most directly: the desire for material things; the desire for sensual pleasures; and the desire for approval and recognition. In all of these areas we go to pains to seek out objects and people to fulfill our desires. Let's look at two of these more closely. We will merely glance at the third, since it was dealt with already when we studied the commandment against adultery.

Amazing Junk

As we saw from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was probably teaching directly about this commandment (like he was on some of the others), even though he did not quote it. What he wants us to understand, though, is that the remedy for wanting stuff is "seeking first the kingdom of God."

Christians in America today need to be woken up to the suffocating selfishness we live in. We are so wealthy, and we find it so easy to be self-sufficient, that we don't see ourselves clearly. It may not be our fault, but we live in one of the most expensive places, in the richest country in the history of the earth. We have everything. Our houses alone are worth more than the life fortunes of entire communities in the poorer countries of the world.

But we are not content with this, are we? We compete with one another, albeit more or less secretly. If friends are coming over, we feel the need to match the level of hospitality they showed us, because we don't want to feel lesser or inadequate. We throw away old things because it's cheaper to get new stuff than to fix the old stuff. A recent *USA Today* poll showed that as retirement age nears, Americans most fear financial and health problems. But aren't these exactly what Jesus taught us to disregard in our search for the kingdom of heaven?

If we look at ourselves honestly, we are not content. We don't really believe that God will meet our needs. We worry about the things we think we need in order to be secure and happy. We have secret obsessions and uncontrolled lusts for the oddest of things.

I stopped for a moment the other day and came up with a list of "stuff" that I call Amazing Junk. Most of this junk is in my house, so I'm not trying to be "holier-than-thou" about this. But these are all things that, if you think carefully about them, are really ridiculous. They show just how rich we really are:

Automatic fruit juicers. How often do you squeeze orange juice from real oranges? Do you have, like my family does, a \$35 dollar item that performs this once-a-decade task? What's wrong with that 49 cent piece of plastic that does the trick just as well?

Exercise machines. We lavish so much money on transportation and labor-saving devices, that we don't get any exercise. We are so concerned about using time efficiently, that we have devices that promise a beautiful body for only 20 minutes a day! And we can read or watch TV while we become beautiful!

Most software used on home and company business computers. The power in much of today's software, when used for writing letters or keeping simple databases, is like owning a jet plane to take you across the street.

Ties. This is a pet peeve of mine. Ties, I feel, are designed primarily to spill food on.

Children's toys. Designed to remove your child's imagination by doing everything for him or her. And they break almost instantaneously.

Trash compactors. We have so much stuff that we need something that will compress our thrown out stuff so that we can be environmentally correct!

Please note: I said that these things are ridiculous, not wrong. No physical object is morally wrong in itself. But the fact that we have so much of the ridiculous in our treasure chests should be

disconcerting to us.

When it comes to stuff, my own area of weakness is twofold: books and software. I love books. I always have. I have books that I have probably moved five or six times in the last fifteen years but have never opened. I have books that come in series. I have big, serious-looking books. I have paperback books. I have books that make me feel intellectual. I have books that make me feel like I must be a very mature Christian. I have books that I probably don't even know I have.

What can we do about this embarrassment of riches? The answer is easy: give it away. But how much should we give? I don't know. That's between each one of us and the Lord. But let me pass on to you some wise words from C.S. Lewis:

I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them...Particular cases of distress among your own relatives, friends, neighbors or employees, which God, as it were, forces upon your notice, may demand much more: even to the crippling and endangering of your own position.

To conclude our look at *Amazing Junk*, I have a suggestion. Go through your house and gather more of your stuff than you can afford and give it away. Give it to City Team, or to Pat Harrison for the family that our Junior High group is ministering to. If you think you want to go a step further, then consider this: Have you planned a recreational or family fun event sometime in the next couple of weeks or months? Cancel it. Take the money that would have been spent on the event and go with whomever you were going to "have fun" with and serve somewhere. Keep your time with your family or friends, but change the event to an act of service.

The Lust of the Eyes

Let me quickly mention here the prohibition in the tenth commandment against coveting your neighbor's spouse. As we have learned, the antidote to this poison is a little different than when it comes to dealing with a desire for material things. Here, the antidote is found in Prov. 5:18:

**Let your fountain be blessed,
And rejoice in the wife of your youth.**

It isn't that we are to deny or try not to feel the strong urges of physical love within us. It's just that these feelings are to be appropriately channeled within the bounds of marriage.

Now I want to point out one thing that is half scary and half amusing. When God first wrote the commandments for Moses, he said that we were not to covet, and the first specification added to the commandment was that we were not to covet our neighbor's house. Then the Israelites wandered for forty years in the wilderness before they entered the promised land. Moses took the opportunity just before his death to preach a sermon to them before entering the land. That sermon is essentially what the book of Deuteronomy is. In chapter 5, Moses revisits the Ten Commandments. But this time, when he comes to number ten, I think he had learned something, or maybe he was merely trying to improve on God's order. Maybe it was that when they wandered in the wilderness, the Israelites had no houses for their neighbors to covet. In any event, after telling them not to covet, Moses now specifies first, that they were not to covet their neighbor's wife. What happened in the wilderness in those forty years?

Coveting Your Neighbor's Admiration and Approval

I struggle with all three areas of lust that I have mentioned. But by far the deepest problem for me is the burning lust I have for approval and recognition from my neighbors, my colleagues

at work, and my family. For a long time I didn't recognize this in myself. I thought I was fairly independent and didn't really care what others thought about what I did or said. But I've learned that all of that is a cover for me. Deep inside I am yearning for acceptance and approval. But instead of finding rest for my soul in God, I seek it in my fellow man. At work I know that I can be energized for hours and hours and work with amazing efficiency and creativity, all because I am trying to "look good" in front of my peers and superiors. I can steal your admiration and approval just like I can a physical object you possess that I might covet after.

We would be surprised if we could look at our lives the way God does. We would see that much of what we do is posturing and posing. Even in those moments when it would seem that we are acting out the service and love exemplified by Christ, if we looked carefully we would find the craving to be loved, the fear of rejection or the avoidance of pain.

If you are at all like me, then you will relate to this example. Many of you know that over the years I have spent a lot of time working in the nursery during the first service. What does working in the nursery have to do with coveting? you might ask. It sounds more like selfless service, doesn't it? Well, yes, it does. But God knows that I struggle with working in the nursery. I know that I can make people think of me as a selfless servant if I work there. I can hold babies and change diapers, and it is totally safe. The babies are not a challenge to me. I can avoid a whole lot of pain that burdens my adult brothers and sisters here if I am hidden away in the nursery. So it's safe, it's challenge-free, it's easy. And to top it all off, I can *make* a good image for myself out of it. It's a package deal. And part of that package is the continuous presence of covetousness in my heart. I covet your approval of me, so I avoid what might be the real challenge in your life and win your heart by taking care of your child. It looks good on the outside. And yet in God's sight it's sin. He uses it for his glory, of course. But it is sin nonetheless.

Where do you sin and cover it up with an image of Christian service? Why do you work in the Sunday School program? What really motivates you to attend a Home Fellowship group? Why do you sing in the choir? Why do you want to be an Bible study leader? I am not saying that you should not aspire to these things. I could just as well ask, What keeps you from doing these things? It would not be wrong for me to go back to the nursery. It doesn't matter where I go. I carry my sin with me wherever I go. But to miss the presence of sin in our hearts in these areas that look so good on the outside, is to miss the chance to understand how completely depraved we are, and how desperately we need the grace of our Lord Jesus.

I have a challenge for you if you struggle with coveting your neighbor's admiration or approval. Larry Crabb has a book that some of you have heard of: *Inside Out*. I challenge you to take thirty minutes a day for the next month and read (or re-read) this book and write out the answers to the questions in the study guide that is available with the book. Read for fifteen minutes and write for fifteen minutes. You'll be amazed at the result. You will see yourself as the sinner that you are in ways you've never seen before. It will probably depress you. But that's good because, as we will see in a moment, this is the beginning of the path towards death that we must take if we would be saved.

Desire and Death

Have you ever wondered what it might be like to meet someone who really followed the tenth commandment? What would it look like to be free from out-of-priority covetousness? I tried to put some thoughts together on this, but I am afraid it is a poor picture of what the real thing will be like in heaven.

The man who does not covet would be content with what God has given him. He would earn enough money to support his family at a reasonable level. He would trust absolutely that God was responsible and would provide for his material needs. He would spend time seeking out ways to provide for his poorer and spiri-

tually needy neighbors. He would seek the standards of God and the motions of the Holy Spirit in his life above all things. He would delight in the “wife of his youth” (if he had one) and would not have a wondering eye for other women. He could look a beautiful woman in the eye and see a person, not an object. His “free time” activities would be guided by his consuming passion for the welfare of his neighbor.

His house might be somewhat shabby by a lot of standards, because he would not particularly care about physical, passing things. His delight would be in people and relationships instead. His children (if he had any) would probably find him confusing, but very real, and always there for them. They might find him hard sometimes, because he would hold to high standards—the standards of God. Character would be of utmost importance to him in his children. Anything that involved the deep concerns of his loved ones would concern him. He would listen carefully, because the man who does not covet does not need to have his own views expressed above those of others. At work he might be anywhere on the corporate scale, from CEO to stock clerk. And it wouldn't matter. He wouldn't care much about that. Work would not be for him a means to financial security. There is no security in financial matters, he would say. Security comes from God. Work would be an opportunity to interact with people, to love them and serve them.

The woman who does not covet would share many of these characteristics. The apostle Peter would approve of the way she dressed: simply and modestly. She would not make the Ten Best Dressed Women in America list; she probably would not know that such a list existed. And if someone told her about it, she would certainly not be desirous of being on the list. Nor would she be disgusted by it; she would probably find it confusing or boring. Her husband and children would wake up each day and call her blessed. She would also be confusing to her children, caring more about their attitudes and character than about whether they were popular, good in sports, or “well-adjusted.” She, more radically than her male counterparts, would challenge the standards and opinions of a world that demands that a woman be “all woman” on the outside and yet “all man” on the inside. But her challenge would not come through confrontation and argumentation. It would come through the fact that those around her could not deny her heart of love, service and devotion.

I could go on. But the bottom line is this: people who do not covet are people who have their priorities straight, who “seek first the kingdom of God.” They would make most of us a little uncomfortable. We might even think them kind of weird. But we would also admire and respect them.

While studying the tenth commandment, it struck me that my whole life could be described as an attempt to make other people think that I am like the man I just described. If I can get you to think that I am him, then I'll be OK. For a few fleeting moments I saw the depth of my depravity in this area. But I am a pro at dealing with those moments of self-revelation. I know how to cover up. It doesn't matter what we struggle with: we have learned to hide it.

If I am the type who struggles with lust and thoughts of fantasy, that's one thing. But if you find out about it, I'm devastated. So I'm not going to let you find out. If I am the type who is competitive and grasping after material things, I might cover this up in good Christian clothing by teaching a workshop on dealing with being a workaholic. I would be fashionably self-revealing about it. But even this is well-managed and controlled. But if you ever saw the anger, frustration, lust and envy which makes my soul look like a car mechanic's apron after a long, greasy day's work, you would die. No, I would die. I'd just die.

But isn't that what it's all about? Isn't that what the law is for? If the first nine commandments didn't get you, then I hope this

one does. The law forces us to Christ, because it overwhelms us with a holy standard that we cannot live up to. Earlier I read part of Romans 7, where Paul is explaining the dynamic of law and sin in the soul. As the chapter progresses, Paul delves more deeply into the fact of sin in his life, a reality brought to light by the law. Listen as I read some more sentences from Romans 7:

I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revivd and I died...For I know that nothing good dwells within me...So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand...Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Right now, you and I have a choice. If you are a Christian, then you can keep making this choice, probably for the millionth time. If you have never given over your life to Jesus Christ, then you have the opportunity of making this choice for the first time.

What choice am I talking about? It is the choice we must make in response to Paul's question: “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Who will rescue me from the evil that the law has proved beyond doubt lurks within my heart? Who will free me from the tyranny of my hurtful habits and envious lusts? Who will free me from competing with my neighbor? From longing for his approval? From desiring to have what he has?

There are only two ways to respond to this choice. We can say, in a thousand different ways, “I will do it.” If I try harder, if I dig deeper, if I move away from home, if I stop drinking, if I hang out with a better group of friends, if I go back to that therapist, if I can just get out of debt, if I get that promotion, if my parents hadn't abused me, if I had a husband that listened to me, if I..., if I..., if I... I can somehow or other, do it myself. That's one answer. And in the end where will this get me? Scripture makes this frighteningly clear: It gets me the Hell of Fire, damnation and separation from God, an eternity of loneliness and self-satisfied horror.

But what does Paul say the other choice is?

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!...There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

The other choice is Jesus: No condemnation. Forgiveness, undeserved. Christians call it grace. Instead of death after death, with him there is Life after death. But first there is death. Are you willing to die? That is the sentence of the law, for all us. And the sentence will be carried out for all of us, for Christian and non-Christian alike. It's just that for the Christian, there is the life of Christ after the death of ourselves.

This quote from C.S. Lewis' book *Mere Christianity*, well summarizes our series on restoring the ancient boundaries:

People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain in which God says, “if you keep a lot of rules I'll reward you, and if you don't I'll do the other thing.” I do not think that is the best way of looking at it. I would much rather say that every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.

What are you becoming? What is your choice?

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