

Foundations: The Tenth Commandment Deuteronomy 5:21 (AFBC 10/30/16)

Picture this: two children are placed in a room filled with wonderful toys. All the newest and best are right there where both children can see them, touch them, and play with them. The first child looks everything over and makes his selection—but what happens next?

Well, if you've ever had children close to the same age, or ever observed children in a room filled with toys, you already know. The second child goes over to the first and tries to take away whatever toy it was that the first child chose.

So, what makes that particular toy so attractive? The fact that the other child has it—that's what! So here we find early evidence of a problem many people struggle with all their lives—namely, coveting.

Commandment number ten, which we find in Deuteronomy 5:21, says, **"You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbor's house or land, his manservant or his maidservant, his ox or donkey,** (or his new car or boat or camper or exotic vacation or riding lawn mower or success at work or perfect children or you fill in the blank. It's all in there because the last phrase says) **or anything that belongs to your neighbor."**

The world we live in is like a room filled with toys--far more toys than we need, in fact--but this does not prevent us from focusing our desires on someone else's toys! God tells us not to do that--it's a bad way to live and leads to all kinds of problems—but we do it anyway.

And it will soon get worse because the "season of getting" is fast approaching—or... is it the season of giving? It gets confusing. We get to be like Dennis the Menace who finally finds something that he really wants to read. He exclaims, "This catalog's got a lot of toys I didn't even know I wanted!" Can we relate? That's why they keep sending us those catalogs, right?

God knows we don't need everything we want. When we start wanting real bad something that God knows we don't need, wanting it only because someone else has it, desiring it to the point of trying to devise a way to get it, we're guilty of coveting.

We see this all through the Bible: 1) Adam and Eve coveted God's knowledge and disobeyed. 2) The sons of Jacob coveted their father's favor and sold Joseph into slavery. 3) Saul coveted David's popularity and lost his mind, then his kingdom. 4) David coveted Uriah's wife, took her for himself and had him killed.

5) James and John coveted position and power which threatened the unity of the apostles. 6) Judas coveted money and betrayed Jesus. 7) The Pharisees coveted Jesus' power and popularity and had him crucified.

8) Even a spiritual giant like the Apostle Paul confessed to coveting. He wrote in Romans 7:7-8: **"What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet.' But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire."**

Paul thought he was doing well in relation to God's law until he began to understand the power of coveting, and the way it leads to other sins. It was only then that he began to understand he could never keep God's law perfectly, and thus he needed God's grace and forgiveness. In other words, Paul realized he needed a Savior.

Where do we see coveting today? We mentioned children with their toys, along with adults and our toys, of course. But coveting can involve most anything about another person: their wealth, fame, influence, popularity, attractiveness—whatever!

The last commandment is more general in nature. It doesn't address one specific action—like lying, stealing, or killing (i.e., no life is lost, nothing goes missing, no one's reputation is ruined)—but rather an attitude of the heart that so often leads to these other sins.

The tenth commandment says, "Don't even think about it." It tells us to avoid the kind of thinking and desiring and obsessing that eventually could lead to other sins: "You shall not covet."

This commandment is crucial in the way it relates back to the other commandments and then reaches forward toward the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus. It serves as a kind of bridge between the Old Testament Law and the Christian Gospel. Let's take a closer look:

I. First, Recognizing the Dangers of Coveting: I want us to understand how coveting ensnares our lives and holds us captive. Friends, God does not tell us to do some things and avoid doing others just to show us who's boss.

In love, He graciously instructs us concerning what is best for our lives and what will lead us to joy and fulfillment. He commands us not to covet for several reasons:

A. It Strains Relationships: Coveting is seeing what we don't have when compared with our neighbor. The result is we feel like we're competing with our neighbor. We see our neighbors only as people who have something that we want for ourselves. Before long, the relationship begins to unravel.

The emphasis in the 10th Commandment is not on the "things" (houses, land, servants, etc.) mentioned, but on the "persons" to whom they belong. Four times the word "neighbor" is used. We may think only in terms of whether something is right or wrong for us, but God always wants us to consider how our actions, and even our thoughts and motivations, affect our neighbors.

Most of us don't covet what Bill Gates has. His fortune is beyond anything we can begin imagine. But our neighbors are close by. They're like us, except they have something we want for ourselves!

So coveting can strain and even destroy relationships with neighbors that Jesus told us we are to care about rather than compete with. Coveting strains our relationships.

B. It Sends Us on a Downward Spiral: So many sins begin with coveting. King David is one of the saddest examples of this. His demise began by coveting his neighbor's wife.

That led to adultery, which broke the seventh commandment. Then, in order to steal Bathsheba, breaking the 8th commandment, David committed murder and broke the sixth commandment. He broke the ninth commandment by lying about it. This brought dishonor to his parents, breaking the 5th commandment.

He didn't put God first in any of this, breaking the 1st and 2nd commandments. And by dishonoring God's name, he broke the 3rd commandment as well. {from J. Oswald Sanders, Bible Men of Faith (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 13}.

This whole downward spiral was set in motion by coveting. Our neighbor has a new boat, camper, or vacation home. We think we have to have one too. Once we've invested all that money, though, it doesn't make sense not to use it.

Our weeks are crowded already, so we take off most weekends, failing to honor the Lord's Day. We use the Lord's money to pay for it, leaving little time or money for God. Once we begin the downward spiral, though, the rationalizations for it get easier.

C. But there's a third trap with coveting: It Consistently Disappoints Us. In the end, what we thought we wanted and needed so badly doesn't really provide the satisfaction we dreamed it would.

The myth is that we reach a point when coveting goes away. Walter Reuther was a labor leader. He used to say that all the strife in America would end when our economy got to the point where every family could afford two Cadillacs (Today: Mercedes, Beamers?). But that's not true. No amount of stuff ever cures coveting.

Each new acquisition may provide a quick, short-term fix; but soon there's a new object of desire. This is how coveting traps us! What we think will be gained never quite matches up with reality. The result is always something less.

The director of a mental institution took a friend on a tour of the facility. They passed by one room where there was a man beating his head against the padded walls.

He kept saying, "Linda, how could you do this? Linda, how could you do this?" The director explained that the man was in love with Linda; and when Linda broke up with him, it drove him mad.

They went to the next cell, and there was another man saying, "Linda, Linda, how could you do this? How could you do this?" The friend said, "Did Linda break up with him too?" "No," the director said, "That's the man Linda married."

How often do we get what we have longed for only to discover that it really didn't bring the satisfaction we were expecting? Jesus tried to warn us. **"Watch out!"** he said. **"Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."** (Luke 12:15)

When the Declaration of Independence was first drafted, Thomas Jefferson wrote about our inalienable rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of possessions." Those working on the document with Jefferson changed those words to the more familiar "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

We also get those two confused. We've come to believe that the pursuit of possessions is one in the same with the pursuit of happiness—but it's not!

I like the story, disturbing though it is, about the rich businessman who sees a fisherman sitting lazily by his boat. "Why aren't you out there fishing?" he asked. "Because I've caught enough fish for today."

"Why don't you catch more fish?" the man asked. "What would I do with them?" said the fisherman. "You could sell them for more money," he replied. "You could buy a bigger and better boat, go into deeper water, catch even more fish and make lots of money. Soon you could have a fleet of fishing boats and be rich like me."

The fisherman asked, "Then what would I do?" "Well, you could sit down and enjoy life," he said. The fisherman looked at him, kinda' puzzled, and replied, "What do you think I'm doing now?"

I share that story not to hold the fisherman up as a good example. God gives us abilities and opportunities and He wants us to be good stewards of them. I'm not so sure the fisherman was.

But He also wants us to find balance in life, and to place our faith in Him rather than in our wealth and possessions. So the wealthy businessman may not be the best model for us either.

It's not hard to imagine the fisherman coveting the wealth of the rich man, while the rich man coveted the fisherman's free time. It's the "grass is greener" syndrome--it's how coveting works.

If the rich man and the fisherman could trade places, they would both likely feel disappointed before long. What we obtain through coveting always disappoints in the end.

II. Avoiding the Dangers of Coveting: How can we overcome this temptation? The answer is found in two foundational qualities of the spirit: contentment and gratitude. Together, they form a powerful antidote against coveting.

The Hebrew word for “contentment” is often translated as “satisfaction.” It seems to be an elusive quality in our world. Mick Jagger complained, “I can’t get no satisfaction...” Maybe old Mick was looking for it in the wrong places. Maybe we do too.

Often in the Bible we hear that God’s people will “eat and be satisfied.” That is, they will eat until they’re full. Most of us live out this promise—perhaps at EVERY meal! It’s what keeps us coming back to the Y!

Think for a moment about Thanksgiving dinner—it’ll be here before we know it! Picture yourself surrounded by Turkey with dressing and cranberry sauce; sweet potato soufflé, asparagus casserole, and peas or beans, of course, for those who don’t like asparagus. Throw in a few salads and desserts—you know, all our favorite dishes.

You sit down for that Thanksgiving meal and you don’t get up until you’ve gotten your satisfaction, and then some! When finally you push back from the table, you’re content--you don’t dare have any more--at least “not right now!”

See this as the very opposite of coveting. To covet is to keep on saying, “MORE! MORE! MORE!!” Contentment says, “I have enough—this is plenty--NO MORE.”

But what if, instead, we just kept right on eating? It wouldn’t make us feel better. In fact, we’d feel awful (I know this from experience!). We’d just want to go somewhere and lie down, though we’d probably be too uncomfortable to sleep.

Jesus warns us this also happens when we get too much stuff--that an insatiable desire for more and more stuff is unhealthy. Our priorities get turned upside down: our hearts, inside out.

Things become more important than people. Money becomes more important than life. About the time we get that last barn built to hold it all, our soul is required of us. There’s no contentment in that.

Do you know the little comic strip called “The Wizard of Id?” Recently in the comics, a monk puts a message on the sign in front of the church while a monk from another church is watching. The message reads, “Thou shalt not covet.” The monk from the other church sees it and says, “I sure wish we had a signboard like that at our church.” (Subtle....)

Maybe we should put a message on our church sign. We could put, "You shall not covet" on one side and "You shall be thankful" on the other. Gratitude, you see, is the remedy for coveting.

Coveting is a heart problem. Gratitude is a heart solution. Only God can see our hearts. He knows if our hearts are dominated by coveting or gratitude. One or the other will control our attitude, meaning one or the other will dictate our thoughts, our actions, and our whole outlook on life.

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians ends with some final instructions for Christians everywhere. He says: "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (I Thessalonians 5:18)

Which is to say if you and I are in Christ, if we're abiding in His will, we're going to be thankful people--in all circumstances of life. There's no commandment that makes this happen, though. The law tells us not to covet, but commandments can't make us grateful.

Only Jesus can--His Gospel of forgiveness and love can transform us into contented, grateful people! If you struggle with wanting more and more, confess this to Him.

Tell him about the pressure this puts on your spirit. Ask the Lord to forgive you and cleanse you so that you can experience the contentment that comes with gratitude.

Gratitude goes deep when we begin to understand that Jesus already knows about all our sin and failure, yet He still loves us—He still died for us—He still holds out those nail-pierced hands and invites us to come to Him—to be loved, and forgiven, and set free.

That's when gratitude fills our hearts and changes our whole outlook on life. And we find ourselves saying "thank you."

Again and again in our hearts, through our words, our attitudes and our actions, we say, "Thank you, Lord. Thank you. Thank you."