

The Ninth and Tenth Commandments

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From one point of view this study of the Ten Commandments is a dirty business—comparable to what lawyers must have to do. They must really learn to love their fellow man. So, too, you, in your study of the Law at teachers' conferences, are no doubt really learning to love your fellow man. No doubt previous papers on the first eight commandments have probed into all the clean, bright, pleasant, and agreeable corners of the noble human psyche. It must have been thrilling to discuss man's proclivity toward godliness, his predilection for worship, his fondness for spiritual truth, his love of obedience to authority, his inclination toward charity, his penchant for marital fidelity, his proneness to insistence upon absolute truth over against his neighbor, his immoderate concern for the inviolability of his neighbor's property. Perhaps any number of you could have been fairly twittering over the innate goodness of man. Did you raise your voices in rapturous paeans to the human spirit? Did you all recite together your Scout oaths and laws and pledge undying allegiance to the principles of humanism, legalism, and moralism?

This likely will be your reaction today too, as we look at Bible characters like the rich fool, Achan, Ahab, Judas—and as we look ourselves in the heart!

On the other hand, viewed from a Christological perspective, a study of the Commandments could be a genuinely happy endeavor. All of a sudden we're no longer lawyers, engaged in legalisms, in indictments, prosecutions, defenses, convictions, appeals, etc., but we're God's redeemed children, heirs of heaven, kings, priests, saints, offering our bodies as living sacrifices, moved by the mercies of God, carrying lamps for our footsteps and lights for our paths, standing fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and looking intently into the perfect law of liberty. We twitter genuinely. A song to the Three-In-One is on our lips. We encourage each other to walk in the Spirit. We humble ourselves and smite ourselves on the breast in daily contrition and repentance. We crucify the flesh, keeping our bodies under subjection, lest, while preaching to others, we ourselves become castaways. We pray, "lead us not into temptation," and "forgive us our trespasses." We sing, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive honor and glory and might and dominion."

Then it's fun. Aren't you glad this isn't the ecclesiastical equivalent of the American Bar Association gathered here today?

Exodus 20:17

On to the last of the Commandments. Let's begin with a rather intensive look at the wording of the Ninth and Tenth Commandments, at the letter that killeth the old man, but guideth the new. Exodus 20:17 says, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or his donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (NIV)

Chamad

Chamad is the Hebrew for "covet," and it means "desire." Of itself it has no evil connotation like our "covet," so the context must tell you whether it is a wholesome or an evil desire. Desire directed toward things of another is wrong, as also in Exodus 34:23,24, where God

assures his people that the heathen will not covet their land while they leave it three times a year to worship Him. Achan confesses his sin: “When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them.” (Josh.7:21) Maybe punishing the whole class for the disobedience of one isn’t so bad. That’s what God did to Israel, before punishing Achan personally with death by stoning. Do not covet what has been devoted to God! Does that lesson from the story of Achan tell us anything about begrudging God His share of our earnings?

Micah denounces those who “covet fields and seize them and houses and take them.” (Mic.2:2) What sort of people were being denounced? Were these the typical villains of the cartoons and melodramas, the dastardly men in black who plague poor widows and send their daughters on one way trips into saw mills? Absolutely not, although man likes to think these types are the guilty ones. The people denounced by the prophet were scrupulous in their outward practice of religion (6:6). But in just acts and in their love of mercy they were lacking (6:8). In their business dealings, they were less than scrupulous, with their short ephas, dishonest scales, false weights, and smooth tongues (6:10-12). “They observed the statutes of Omri and all the practice of Ahab’s house.” (6:16) Ahab, you recall, coveted the vineyard of Naboth, his neighbor, and then robbed him of it with a show of right. The very name “Ahab” conjured up images of the dastardly villain for us, but he was likely the picture of rectitude in his time. For pastors and teachers, generally pictures of rectitude in their communities, the lessons of Micah should not go unheeded. Nor should they for members of our congregations and the children in our schools, likewise generally, pictures of rectitude. Aren’t the pictures often forgeries, cheap, gaudy imitations lacking in the detail, the depth and the technique of the Master? Consider the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, those pictures of rectitude of Jesus’ day, who, in actuality, were “lovers of money” (Luke 16:14) and who “devoured widows” houses. (Mark 12:40) These, too, had all the forms of godliness, but were lacking in the substance and power.

Let the sinful, human spirit be warned. But let the new man be encouraged also. Our desire, our *chamad*, is properly directed, when its object is the precious world of God (Ps. 19:11), when it concerns itself with our own property, a blessing from God (2 Chr.32:27), and, chiefly, when it is focused on the “Desire of nations.” (Hag. 2:7) Although, from a human perspective “there is nothing in his appearance that we should ‘desire’ him” (Is.53:2). These Scriptures use the word *chamad*, in its positive sense. Rather interestingly, one of Esau’s descendants, Hemdan, had a name related directly to our word (Gen.36:26). The “Pleasant one” was he.

What Not to Covet—House

The commandments’ specifically prohibited objects of coveting bear comment. “House” is a synecdoche: in the repetition of the law for emphasis’ sake in Deuteronomy 5:21 we read “house or land, that is all real estate. How often haven’t you driven past beautiful homes in exclusive neighborhoods and coveted? A neighbor’s swimming pool on a hot July day can do it, or his fireplace on a cold January day. A barn with a few horses can do it for me. So can my neighbor’s new car, his garden, or his patio. Notice that the Lord does not say, “Don’t covet obsessively, or don’t let your coveting get out of hand.” He says simply, “Don’t covet! No desire whatsoever for your neighbor’s house!” You’re killing me, Lord. Wouldn’t the commandment have more force if we used the word “desire” instead of “covet”? “Covet,” besides being a word

rarely used and probably little understood, sounds insidious and wrong, like nothing done by good people like you and I, only by the dastardly villains.

Wife

After the real estate of one's neighbor on the list of illicit objects of desire comes one's neighbor's wife. Jesus regularly referred to society as "this adulterous and sinful generation." And he equated desire for one's neighbor's wife with adultery. (Matt. 5:28) In contrast to today's rock and country western music, which graphically and condoningly portrays the flirtatious philandering of our generation, the Lord strictly prohibits not only the overt act of adultery, but the very beginnings of it, namely the desire for the spouse of another. "For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life, keeping you from the immoral woman, from the smooth tongue of the wayward wife. Do not lust (*chamad*) in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes." (Prov. 6:23-25) Again, contrast this with your favorite Dolly Parton record. Apparently the worst way to sell records today would be to sing about the love between husband and wife.

Let the sinful human nature of first of all us pastors and teachers be warned. Alarming are the reports and seemingly increasing, of brothers and sisters in the ministry who must resign in blame and reproach to themselves and their offices because of the sin of adultery. Ours be the resolve of the Psalmist; "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." (119:11) Ours be the understanding and course of action of Job. "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl. For what is man's lot from God above, his heritage from the Almighty on high? Is it not ruin for the wicked, disaster for those who do wrong? Does he not see my ways and count my every step?" (Job 31:1-4)

Would you like your desire to be regularly titillated by the sight of nude bodies romping on sun-drenched beaches? That is the type of vacation enticements that are being served up to the people of Germany through respectable publications like *Der Spiegel*. At this point Europe appears still to have the edge in sophistication on us here in America, but we are not far behind, with cable T.V.'s exciting offerings and regular T.V. fare like "Solid Gold." But our righteousness must exceed that of the world. Has the time come for us to purge our homes of their tubes?

And the push there is to rationalize and excuse the sins of adultery and divorce today! A sectarian preacher who looked at a car I advertised recently in the paper spoke of his recent divorce and his chagrin over the congregation's request for his resignation. Although he admitted he had no Scriptural reason for the divorce, he still felt it valid on the basis of a loss of love for his spouse. Surely there is forgiveness for these sins, as there was for King David, but what misery David, the preacher, our brethren could have avoided—the misery we can avoid! And the motivation we have to do so! Not, again, the motivation of the lawyer, but that of the saint, looking into the perfect law of liberty. Our flesh can still stand a good deal of healthy fear of God's wrath. Our spirit can be truly constrained by a contemplation of God's mercies and guided by a concentration on God's rule; "Have no desire for your neighbor's wife."

Manservant or maidservant, ox, donkey, or anything

How a Harxist-Leninist would attack this portion of Scripture and say, "If it weren't for capitalism, you wouldn't have to worry about coveting your neighbor's property or employees." Humanistic means to combat man's innate cupidity have been socialism and communism, or the

legal regulation of ownership and management of goods and services. Let no one be subjected to the humiliation of working for a single individual or privately owned corporation. We're all comrades. And owning another human being? Unthinkable! So pontificate the social engineers. So pontificate the abolitionists and the carpetbaggers. And so legislate the communists, the socialists, and the democrats (small "d"!) And so apply they Band-Aids to the vast social and economic problems of the world. Why not blame society's institutions and social structures? It gets the individual off the hook, doesn't it? When God attacks sin, it is not the sin of classes, or races, or systems, but the sins of people, the sins of every heart, and the sin of every heart, which is separation from God, and which can be atoned for in only one way.

The way Jesus handled the questions of class struggle, rich and poor, the haves and the have-nots, etc., can be seen by a perusal of Luke chapters fifteen and sixteen. With the stories of the lost sheep the lost coin, and the prodigal son, he teaches publicans, sinners, Pharisees about man's reconciled status with God. The parable of the unjust steward and its advice to disciples about the proper use of the "mammon of unrighteousness" follows. Then, in the hearing of Pharisees, whom Luke describes as "covetous" (KJV: literally, *philarguroi*, lovers of money, Luke 16:14), Jesus lays down his famous dictum: "No servant can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and money." At this the Pharisees derided Jesus and were given the further reply. "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight." Following that comes the parable of the Rich Man (singular) and Poor Lazarus (singular). Jesus' approach was to discuss individuals and the thoughts of our hearts in the light of the eternal and in the light of our relationship to God—God seeking the lost; you cannot serve God and mammon, God knowing the hearts; heaven and hell. Could you ever envision the Savior touring the world in gold and white robes and skull cap pontificating about human rights, the greediness of first and second world countries, and the need for the rich (plural) to take heed of the plight of the poor (plural)? While some of our social engineers are fools, and some are misguided and naive, others are direct tools of the devil dressed up like sheep.

Deuteronomy 5:21

Telling all Israel to "learn these laws and be sure to follow them," Moses repeated the Decalog in Deuteronomy 5:21. He did not fail to repeat God's statement of motivation, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the of slavery." Liberation from the Egypt of 2500 B.C. and from the Egypt of 1982 A.D. is a very compelling force. And because the wording of this restatement of the Ninth and Tenth Commandments differs a little from that of Exodus 20, we look at it here; 'You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbor's house or land, his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.'

The addition of the word "land" has been noted already. We see also that "wife" is placed first. (Isn't our division of the commandment somewhat artificial?) But the biggest difference here is a new word for "covet," namely, *avah*, which the NIV renders well as "set your desire on." (For some reason the KJV translates the word with "covet" here, and *chamad* with "desire": "Neither shalt thou desire thy neighbour's wife, neither shalt thou covet thy neighbour's house...")

Avah

Literally, *avah* means to bend, inflect, or turn aside to something. It can have a very good connotation, as in Ps. 132:13, where the Lord “desires” Zion for his dwelling and Is. 26:9, where the believer “yearns” for the Lord. It can have a very neutral intent, as in Dt. 14:26 and other places, where it means “like” or “want”. It can have a very negative connotation, as we will be seeing in many places. And it can have a very, very negative connotation, when, in characteristic Semitic fashion, it is doubled for emphasis’ sake, “to desire a desire.” This latter use is found in Numbers 11:4 and Psalm 106:14, where the people’s craving for food other than manna put God to the test. Again, the context will have to determine the sense. In its thirty plus occurrences, the NIV uses mostly “desire” or “crave,” the KJV “desire” or “covet.” Its parallel usage in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 show us it is practically synonymous with *chamad*.

Proverbs 23:1-8 contains two occurrences of *avah* and would be downright hilarious, if the truth of it did not hurt so much. It is advice to crave the delicacies neither of the rich nor the stingy. Ask your students sometime if they would someday like to become rich, and then have them read this section.

The cravings and hopes of the sluggard and the wicked are contrasted with the desires of the righteous: “The *desire* of the righteous ends only in good, but the hope of the wicked only in wrath.” (Prov. 11:23) “The sluggard *craves* and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied.” (Prov. 13:4) “The sluggard’s craving will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work. All day long he craves for more, but the righteous give without sparing.” (Prov. 21:25,26) “He boasts of the cravings of his heart; he blesses the greedy and reviles the Lord. In his pride the wicked does not seek him, in all his thoughts there is no room for God.” (Ps. 10:3,4) The author of the above Proverbs passages observed also this about man’s desires. “God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart *desires*, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil.” (Eccl. 6:2) If only Solomon could have talked with our Synod’s deferred giving counselor.

In three passages of the Scripture (Num. 11:34; 33:16, and Dt. 9:2), the Hebrew word *avah* can be seen even in our English Bibles, for it became part of the name given to the place where the Lord struck the people with a severe plague while the meat they had craved was still in their mouths. There they buried a lot of the people, hence the name of the place, Kibroth Hataavah, “graves of craving.” That’s calling a spade a spade. Do we ever tell it like it is in our denotation of things? Not really. We have our “graves of lust.” Out on the Blackfoot Indian Reservation near Glacier Park, Montana, all the highway curves of any degree are crowded with crosses, marking the spots where everyone knows all the drunk Indians went off the highway and were killed. (They must all have been very religious Indians.) But otherwise we tend to wax euphemistic in the naming of our towns and streets: Clearwater, Florida, for example, has drinking water peppered with black particles and tasting and smelling for all the world like sulfur, according to one “snowbird” I talked with recently. But how many tourists per year would a “Stinkwater” or “Sewerwater” Florida attract?

New Testament References to Coveting

The New Testament differs not at all from the Old in its message regarding man and his desires. The Greek of the New Testament, however, does require special attention. We shall first look at the words most frequently associated with the idea of the Ninth and Tenth Commandments. Then we shall conclude the paper with some summary remarks.

Epithumeo

The word used by the Septuagint for both *chamad* and *avah* in Dt. 5 is *epithumeo*. Twice in Romans Paul quotes the commandment, “Thou shalt not covet,” (7:8, 13:9) and in both cases this is the Greek word he uses. The preposition *epi* means “toward.” *Themos* by itself everywhere in the New Testament is used for “anger,” but combined with *epi* it has the sense of “desire,” “impulse,” or “inclination.” Therefore the literal meaning is “to keep one’s desire turned toward something.” Like the Hebrew words it can have neutral, positive, or negative connotations, depending on the context. The desire for food on the part of the prodigal son and Lazarus is expressed with the word (Lk. 15:16; 16:21)—so is Jesus’ desire to eat the Passover with his disciples (Lk. 22:15); Paul’s desire to see the Thessalonians again (I Th.2:19); men’s desire for death in great distress (Rev. 9:6); the Prophets’ and righteous men’s desire to know God’s word and mysteries (Mt. 13:17; Lk. 17:22; I Pt.1:12); Paul’s desire to be with Christ (Phil.1.23); a man’s desire for the office of a bishop (I Tm. 3:1), and the desire that Christians be diligent (Heb. 6:11).

Mostly, however, the word denotes an evil desire. The origin of it is three or four-fold. Jesus said: “You are of your father the devil, and the *lusts* of your father you will do.” (Jn. 8:44) The devil made me do it? Yes and no: James puts the onus of blame on good old number one, when he says, “by his own *evil desires* he is dragged away and enticed.” (1:14) But people collectively, i.e. the world, society, its influences, are to blame too: “For everything in the world—the *cravings* of sinful man, the *lust* of his eyes, and his pride in possessions—comes not from the Father but from the world.” (Jn. 2:16) So it is the familiar, sinister triumvirate, the unholy trinity of devil, world and flesh that gives birth to these desires. A fourth culprit, moreover, is ignorance, adduced by both Paul (I Th.4:5) and Peter (I Pt.1:14) to explain, not to excuse, the *epithumia* of Christians before their conversion.

Are we tilting at windmills here, when we get so excited about inner drives and external influences and devils? We can well imagine psychologists being more than mildly amused and irritated by our deep concern over what to them would be wholly natural drives, instincts, and appetites. We’re all familiar with the school of thought—because we’ve all attended that school on occasion, if only to audit the classes—which characterizes conscientious self-examination and criticism as paranoia and inhibition, fear left over from a long gone day of gods and demons. Guilt is pooh poohed. Natural instincts are to be exulted in and go unsuppressed. Free rein, within the limits of “not hurting anyone” is to be given our desires, our appetites, our instincts. Who hasn’t met the fallen-away Catholic who becomes absolutely livid recalling his horrible days in a Catholic grade or high school? The wildest libertines, the freest thinkers today, the Phil Donahues of the world, are former “Catholic” school students who have broken loose from restraint.

Let’s attend a different school for a moment. There’s no problem with inner drives and appetites? Let’s run down a quick list of the consequences of giving free rein to our “instincts” and “appetites” as the Bible puts them to us. All as a result of one form of *epithumia*, or another, come: adultery (Mt. 5:28); a choking out of the word in one’s heart (Mk. 4:19); horrible perverted degradation (Rm. 1:24); God’s wrath, judgment, and continuing punishment (Eph. 2:3; II Pt. 2:10), ruin and destruction (I Tm. 6:9), slavery to the desires (Tit. 3:3), sin, death (Jas. 1:14-16); fights, wars (Jas. 4:1); corruption (2 Pt. 1:4); and a miserable sense of disillusionment when the person wakes up to the fact that all he has craved perishes (Rev. 18:14). Now tell me to lay aside my inhibitions and not to beware my natural instincts! The consequences are dire and eternal.

What's the Answer?

Given a recognition of the evil nature of our instincts and desires, what can be done about them? How can they be kept in check? How can we keep from destroying ourselves? Maybe the answer is cages and bars, the answer for animals in the zoo. That would prevent us from hurting each other. But who's going to guard the cages and who's going to prevent us from hurting ourselves? Robots as guards and padded cells? That's one thought, arrived at, strangely enough by some of the same people who say it's not wrong to indulge your natural instincts.

There are those who out of ignorance or rejection of the law written in their hearts advocate complete laissez-faire, at least for themselves, as we have indicated. They either have not yet experienced the full consequences of their philosophy, or have tried to ignore and deny the consequences the John Belushi's and the Claus von Bulow's of the world.

Then there are those who go to the opposite end of the spectrum and operate with a great deal of natural law. The communists and the socialists regulate human desires politically, throwing in a smattering of the brotherly love notion in their concept of comradeship, and a big smattering of prison camps and mental hospitals for those who disagree with them. They experience partial success, but at a great expense to the party members in terms of joy. The condemnation of the communist system is seen not in the propaganda messages of the U.S. government, but in the expressionless, stone faces of its leaders. I'd get tired of playing God too if all I had to govern mankind with was communist political philosophy.

Then there is Islam, with its rules and regulations *ad infinitum, ad nauseum, ad absurdum*. Islam, which has spawned ascetic Sufis, who suppress desire with monk-like existences, and mystic Sufis and the whirling dervishes, who suppress desire through ecstatic dances and trances, contemplating the divine. The condemnation of Islam is in its lack of true freedom, its law, which makes slaves of its subjects, puppets bowing at certain times, kissing certain rocks, walking in certain circles around certain god-boxes in certain cities.

Then there are the Eastern religions. Lord Krishna says: "One who knows that the position reached by means of renunciation can also be attained by devotional service, and who therefore sees that *sankhya* and *yoga* are on the same level, sees things as they are." Renunciation and devotional service, the two great paths, *sankhya* and *yoga*. I. I. I. I must do it. I must do it. Natural law. Self-righteousness. Condemnation.

There are—saddest of all—religionists who have the Bible, Old and New Testaments, who have the veil over their eyes and look on it as nothing but a rule book. These have built the institutions of learning which produces the Phil Donahues and the James Joyce's of the world. If you want to know how not to teach the Bible, read Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. His natural instincts as a boy living in a religious boarding school run by monks were suppressed by bed-time stories of hell-fire. By their works you shall know them.

O, thank God, we aren't lawyers or Pharisees or communists or Muslims or yogis or libertines or monks and religionists of one stripe or another. Because, finally, then, at first and at last, there is the Gospel. There is the Lord saying: "I have brought you out of Egypt." There is the Lord saying, "In your baptism I have drowned and put to death your Old Adam and have given you my Spirit which will enable you to daily crucify the flesh and keep your body under subjection."

We are not ignorant of God's law, like the heathen, and so do not err in the one extreme of denying the insidious nature of our desires, God has shown us His law, without which, as Paul says, he would not even have known what coveting was (Rom. 7:7,8). But then, also we know

our Savior from sin, and that that Savior is not we ourselves. So we do not err in the opposite direction of making works of the law our pathway to redemption. There are lots of passages in the Bible which exhort the Christian to suppress, control, crucify the flesh with its sinful desires, but I challenge you to find one that does not do this out of complete, prior joy and peace with God through Jesus Christ. There is not one passage like what is to be found in the literature of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, which makes our salvation dependent on our suppression of our appetites. Check these passages out and know that, yes, the Lord wants complete control over our relationship with Him and with our neighbors, we are not to give our desires an inch, lest they take a mile—but, out of love, out of gratitude, out of the sure knowledge that he has brought us out of the Egypt of our sin, out of the Egypt of our society, and out of the Egypt of hell by His death and resurrection:

Gal. 5:16,17,24

I Cor. 10:6

Col. 3:5

I Th. 4:5

I Tim. 6:9,10

II Tim. 2:22

Tit. 2:12

I Pt. 2:11, 4:2,3

I Jn. 2:15

Drink deeply of this spirit. Know sin for what it is. But know your Savior for what He has done. Know his law. But know his gospel. And look intently into that perfect law of liberty. And enjoy your lives as baptized children of God who are walking in the Spirit.

(A concept which you may wish to study on your own, which is often associated with covetousness and which is sometimes translated that way in our English Bibles: greed (Greek: *pleonexia*). References: Mk. 7:21, 22; Lk. 12:15; Rom. 1:29; I Cor. 5:11, II Cor. 9:5; Eph. 4:9; 5:3,5; Col. 3:5, I Th. 2:5; II Pt. 2:3,14.)