

CHAPTER TEN

Green With Envy

You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor ~Exodus 20:17.

INTRODUCTION

One day Abraham Lincoln was walking down the street with two small boys who were both crying loudly. A neighbor passing by inquired, 'What's the matter, Abe? Why all the fuss?' Lincoln responded, 'The trouble with these lads is what's wrong with the world; one has a nut and the other wants it!'¹

If we were to picture these Commandments as a tree or vine, then the Tenth Commandment would be the root system. Failure in our obedience to this one Commandment leads to producing the sins defined by the other nine. It's been said, "Half the world is unhappy because it can't have the things that are making the other half unhappy."

In Parker and Hart's 'The Wizard of Id' comic strip, one monk is putting up a sign on the bulletin board in front of the church while another monk watches. The sign reads 'Thou Shalt Not Covet' and the visiting monk says, 'Boy, I wish we had a signboard like that at our church.'²

In our study of the Tenth Commandment, we will consider Paul's words to Timothy about *contentment*; and we will observe his revelation about himself. We will also consider Adam and Eve and the part *coveting* played in original sin. Exploring this Law will cause us to delve into the root of our own actions - why we may pursue one course of action and not pursue others.

What is coveting?

Webster defines *covet* and *envy* this way:

Covet: 1. to wish for enviously 2. to desire - or to feel *inordinate*³ desire for what belongs to another." (Envy plays a big part in the sin of coveting.)

Envy: "a painful or resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by another joined with a desire to possess the same advantage."

We are guilty of coveting when our desire for *something* or *someone* exceeds what is proper or reasonable. If we were to leave the defining of the parameters of what is reasonable to the individual, we would soon be in a morally bankrupt situation much the same as our present-day

¹ Parson's

² Robert C. Shannon, 1000 Windows, (Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing Company, 1997)

³ *Inordinate*: exceeding reasonable limits.

society. John Maxwell recounts the following story in his book *The Winning Attitude*. “Two cows were grazing in a pasture when they saw a milk truck pass. On the side of the truck were the words, ‘Pasteurized, homogenized, standardized, vitamin A added.’ One cow sighed and said to the other, ‘Makes you feel sort of inadequate, doesn’t it?’” That is exactly the point of our sin. Rather than looking at the uniqueness of what we have to offer, we look at something or someone else and feel inadequate. This is really an affront to God and His graciousness towards us. David Gable makes an interesting observation. He says:

I can't think of anything I do but what somebody I know does it better... Television puts excellence in every living room, so we see national or world best. Pity the local preacher whose flock stacks his sermons against the nation's finest communicators. Or the hometown soprano who feels she must compete with the extraordinarily gifted and trained television singers. If excellence comes by comparison, by excelling among my peers, I quit. Ordinary is my ceiling.⁴

The problem we face, is that too often we are not satisfied with what we have been given; and, instead of “stirring up the gifts” that we do have and becoming better, we turn to “wishful thinking” which produces envy.

Remember the story of Mozart's life told from the perspective of Antonio Salieri. The play and the film were both called *Amadeus*. Salieri was the court musician in Vienna. He worked hard at his craft, writing melodies that were nice and choral pieces that were fine and instrumental works that were good. He knew that God had blessed him.

As a young man he had prayed fervently to God, "Let me make music that will glorify you, Father. Help me lift the hearts of people to heaven. Let me serve you through my music."

Then came the boy wonder, the child prodigy, young Mozart. He dazzled the crowds, playing music as if it was second nature to him. Complex melodies came from his dancing fingers. His melodies were complex and fun all at the same time, songs that soared till they seemed to bring heaven right down to earth.

Here's the catch: Mozart was such an obvious sinner. He was immature, vulgar, and obscene. He made off with the ladies every chance he could get. Salieri grew green with envy. How could life be so unfair. He was the servant of God. Why should Mozart be blessed with such talents? Salieri lived a pious and obedient life. Why should Mozart traffic in all these worldly pleasures and still get ahead? Salieri spent a lifetime of hard and tedious work. Why should it all come so easily for youthful Mozart?

The story continues until Mozart dies a mysterious death. Salieri's eyes gleam. And in the dramatic climax, Salieri sits in an insane asylum, where he curses God for denying him the kind of talent that blessed young Mozart. Envy lurks on the path of the crushed spirit.⁵

⁴ *Leadership*, Vol.9, no.2.

⁵ Brouwer, Wayne; "Taming the Beast," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 118.

COVETOUSNESS AND OUR HEARTS

One of the New Testament Greek words that is translated *covetousness* is *pleonexia* and means a desire for more (see Mark 7:22). Like a black hole that absorbs light, a discontented heart is never satisfied (see Proverbs 27:20). I like the way Francis Schaffer described the difference between desire and coveting:

When does proper desire become coveting? I think we can put the answer down simply: desire becomes sin when it fails to include the love of God or men. Further, I think there are two practical tests as to when we are coveting against God or men: first, I am to love God enough to be contented; second, I am to love men enough not to envy.⁶

Covetousness is one of the causes of the moral decline in our nation today. It has become popular, in the pursuit of self-awareness and self-acceptance to promote personal independence. In the words of one married individual to his spouse: “*I don’t belong to you; you don’t own me*”. Now, considering buying and selling property, that is a correct statement; but, in light of Scriptural guidelines for covenant relationship, that statement is in error. According to the Bible, married partners do *belong* to each other. Therefore, the sin of adultery has its root in the sin of covetousness; because, when a person looks at a married individual and that look turns into lust, then the lustful desire will lead to sin.

The sin of stealing has its root in the sin of covetousness; because the person who steals sees something that belongs to someone else and schemes to find a way to make it his own.

The sin of breaking the *Sabbath* has its root in covetousness; because the person is more concerned about the fulfillment of his own desires than he is about God’s. It’s not that these desires are intrinsically wrong, but that they are being exercised at the wrong time.

The sin of idolatry has its root in covetousness; because we want God to be in an image of *our* design, the product of *our* hand, the outworking of *our* imagination.

We spoke a few moments ago about Webster’s definition including the meaning: *exceeding what is proper or reasonable*.

In the state of Arizona, there is an interstate highway running North and South called I-17. On I-17 there is a speed limit posted: 75 MPH. When you go south to Phoenix and get to Sunset Point, the top of Black Canyon, the posted limit becomes 65 MPH. *That is reasonable* considering the curves and unexpected bumps in the road. It is *not* reasonable to travel down that canyon at 110 MPH. You might have a vehicle such as a Porsche or Corvette that has no trouble negotiating those curves at a high rate of speed; but that is only *part* of the reasoning for the posted limit. Another part of the engineers’ reasoning is consideration for the other drivers on the road. The Arizona highway engineers considered all the known variables and determined that 65 was the maximum *safe* speed for that stretch of highway. Ten years ago, that same stretch of highway was posted at 55 MPH. Occasionally, when lawmakers recognize the changing environment and other considerations, the laws are changed. Not God’s Law! **All** the variables have already been computed! The parameters for this sin have *already* been set forth by **God** in the first Nine Commandments.

The Apostle Paul was referring to the Tenth Commandment when he said, “I would not have known what coveting really was if the Law had not said, ‘Do not covet’” (Romans 7:7). Yes, the

⁶ Schaeffer, Francis; Leadership, Vol. 9, no. 2.

Law reveals sin, and the first Nine Commandments established the fence line; but this Tenth Commandment puts the wire between the fence posts and thus secures our environment.

This Commandment against *coveting* draws particular attention to our neighbor's *house*. Many commentators believe that this is the actual physical dwelling, and it *can* mean that; but the first place this word is used is when God is giving instruction to Noah about building the Ark and telling him to put pitch *within* and without. The word *within* is the Hebrew word, *Bethel*. That is the word in Exodus 20:17 translated *house*. So, we can conclude that the first meaning of this word *house* pertains to what is *inside* your neighbor's dwelling.

This Commandment also deals with people, animals, and things. It starts with that which is closest to our heart and moves outward into the realm of *things*. It is interesting, and no mere coincidence, that the sin of covetousness works the same way. It starts within the heart and works outward! Covetousness is a heart problem! Paul and James link it to lust. Jesus said that the heart (within man) is what defiles him.

Mark 7:21-22 For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.

Covetousness is the *only* sin that we are given specific instructions to crucify. "And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts." (Galatians 5:24)

This Law establishes parameters in our dealings with our neighbors and their possessions. Coveting is heart trouble. I would like for us very briefly to consider one of those warnings.

Mark 7:14-23 Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, 'Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. ¹⁵ Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean.' ... ¹⁷ After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. ¹⁸ 'Are you so dull?' he asked. 'Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him unclean? ¹⁹ For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body. (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean.')

²⁰ He went on: 'What comes out of a man is what makes him unclean. ²¹ For *from within*, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and make a man unclean.' ~Emphasis added.

The context of this passage was a discussion Jesus was having with the leadership about the difference between the Commandments of God—which are absolute; and the traditions of men—which they were using to supersede the Commandments of God. Think for a moment how ridiculous that is.... Ecclesiastes 3:14 tells us that *whatever* God does has *eternal* ramifications.

Jesus was telling them a parable about the root of this ridiculous behavior. What was happening then in Israel still happens today, not only in society, but within the Church! There has even been a phrase coined to describe these traditions: *sacred cows*. Seminary students are warned of the dire consequences of tampering with a congregation's *sacred cows*. Sad to say, there are many *sacred cows* in denominations and in individual congregations. When a *sacred cow* supersedes the Commandments of God, it is time it was tampered with! It is time for it to be torn down and ground

into dust! It is time for God to be exalted by giving to Him His rightful place in our hearts! The Scribes, Pharisees and Chief Priests refused to allow Jesus to deal with their hearts; instead, they crucified the Lord of Glory. What price will our *precious traditions* extract from us?

JESUS PLEADS WITH US TO *UNDERSTAND THE ROOT OF OUR SIN*

These evil things proceed from the *heart*. Our problems do not stem from too much government, or Government intervention in our lives, or our environment and all the corresponding hassles with the EPA. Our problems do not stem from our parents, our personalities, or our genetic predispositions. Our problems, as individuals, as a nation and within the Christian Church, are the result of corrupt hearts. We have hearts that are rotten to the core... hearts that no longer function as God originally intended. What is needed is what has been promised, a heart transplant! “*I will give you a new heart*” (Ezekiel 36:26 -KJV).

JESUS PLEADS WITH US TO *UNDERSTAND THE RESULT OF OUR SIN*

Scripture only knows two major designations: *Holy and profane*. Our old heart takes what is *holy* and makes it *profane* (common) or tries to take what is *common* and make it *holy*. The following Scriptures were mentioned in Chapters Three and Four, but we need to be reminded again, in this Commandment why judgment was brought against Old Testament Israel and its priests.

Ezekiel 22:26 Her priests do violence to my law and *profane my holy things*; they do not distinguish between the holy and the common; they teach that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean; and they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths, so that *I am profaned* among them. ~Emphasis added.

Ezekiel 44:23 And they (the priests) shall teach my people the difference between the holy and profane, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean.

What were they doing in Jesus' day? Worse than in Ezekiel's time

Do you understand? What kind of priest are you? It's not what you eat, drink, wear, live, or what you drive; It's all about your heart! Jesus said: *Behold I make all things new....* Revelation 21:5. A new *covenant*, A new *name*, A new *heart*; and coming soon a new *body*; and new *heavens and new earth*. “Behold I make all things new....”

In Exodus 20:17 we are given a list of six things that belong to our neighbor that we are not to covet; then we are told “*or anything that is your neighbor's*”. That means *anything* that belongs to him, *anything* that is unique to him, *anything* that he has that you don't, *anything*! The list of six was inclusive; the use of *anything* covers *everything else*. In other words, there is no room to covet even a pencil if it belongs to your neighbor. It is not to become part of our heart. Now, in one sense, that list and that word cover physical things; but the use of the word *anything* also includes those things that are *spiritual* in nature.

Spiritual Covetousness

How do we covet spiritual things? We can covet an individual's strong faith, failing to realize that the growth principle of faith in our neighbor is what has made his faith strong. We can be

guilty of coveting an individual's spiritual gift(s) and fail to realize that those gifts were given by the Holy Spirit as a manifestation of His love, grace and power and that they are as unique to our neighbor as ours are to us. We can covet our neighbor's prayer life while failing to discipline ourselves to spend time with God. We can covet another's relationship with God while failing to come to grips with the price that was paid by both God and our neighbor.

The story is told of one man who was exercising this sin of coveting in the spiritual realm when he looked at a friend's close relationship with God and remarked: "I'd give the world to have a relationship with God like you have." To that his friend stated: "That's just what it cost me - the world!"

Coveting is really laziness ... we don't want to put forth the same effort our neighbor did to get what he has. A few years ago, I wrote to a dear man of God named Leonard Ravenhill in the hopes that he would come to our Church and conduct a series of revival meetings. He wrote back in a barely legible scrawl apologizing that he could not come since he was in his eighties, and he no longer traveled for speaking engagements. He went on to say that the key to revival is found in Hosea and Joel but that people are not willing to *pay the price!* We are quick to pray with the Psalmist: *Wilt thou not revive us again?* We periodically sing a hymn about revival.

Revive us Again

*Revive us again ... fill each heart with your love
may each soul be rekindled with fire from above,
Hallelujah thine the glory, Hallelujah Amen,
Hallelujah thine the glory, Revive us again,*

We have convinced ourselves that we really want these things as long as it is God that does them - Zap! We're revived. We *long* for the experience, but don't want to pay the cost. That means we are *lazy* or *selfish*, perhaps, both.

God is an "equal opportunity employer". The Blood of Jesus is just as powerful for me as for you. The potential to *know* God is just as great for a Billy Graham as it is for you and me.

Spiritual coveting is exemplified for us in the life of Cain. He coveted his brother's relationship with God, and then he coveted the fact that his brother's sacrifice was accepted by God. His problem was that he didn't want to put forth the effort to please God – to make God number one in his life. That position was already filled – with Cain. In Chapter One we referred to what had reportedly been said by the late great football coach, Vince Lombardi, "Second place ain't nuthin." That pretty much describes God's feelings about His position in our lives. He is too big for second place. He *is* first place, and there is no second place. Listen to how He describes Himself to Isaiah,

Isaiah 45:5-6, 18, 22 I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. *I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me,*⁶ *so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me.* I am the LORD, and there is no other.¹⁸ For this is what the LORD says—he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited—he says: 'I am the LORD, and there is no other.'²² Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.' ~Emphasis added

The Significance of this Law

In the Garden of Eden, there were two trees of significance: one symbolized Life the other

symbolized Death. The Bible has much to say about trees; and when Jesus walked through Israel, it was a repeated topic of His teaching. He made such statements as: “Every tree that brings not forth good fruit is cut down”, “Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: ...”. His purpose in these statements was to show that the fruit produced corresponds to the type of tree; and, that we as Christians should not only be producing, but that we should be producing *good fruit*.

Luke 13:6-9 Mark 11:13-22

When Eve was in the garden and approached by Satan in the form of a serpent, the Bible says, “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it” (Genesis 3:6).

The Hebrew word translated *pleasing* is the same Hebrew word translated as *covet* in Exodus 20:17. The phrase *also desirable* is translated elsewhere as *lusted*,

Psalm 106:14 (KJV) But *lusted* exceedingly in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert. ~Emphasis added.

Proverbs 21:25-26(KJV) The desire of the slothful kills him; for his hands refuse to labor. ²⁶ He lusts *greedily* all the day long: but the righteous gives and spares not.

Since we have come to understand that this sin is at the root of all the other broken Commandments, we can understand more readily what Paul meant when He said that the love of money was the root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10). That Scripture has been *often* misquoted to read: “*Money* is the root of all evil”. *Money* is not the root, but the *love of money* is. The problem of *coveting’s* grip on our lives is even more pronounced when we consider what John stated in 1 John 2:15, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”

The word for love here is *Agape`* - the kind of love that is rooted in the will and keeps on loving regardless of the circumstances. John is pleading with us not to let the world get that kind of grip on our heart, that we love it without reservation. *That* kind of love is the result of *coveting*. What we are seeing here is that there is progression in the sin of coveting. This progression starts with the eye or one of the senses and rapidly moves into the heart, with the end in view of total domination of our heart; and ultimately our life. “Keep your heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life” (Proverbs 4:23 -KJV).

One of Satan’s tactics since the beginning of time has been to seek to erode the foundation of love that exists between man and God. He attacks that foundation seeking to weaken it and ultimately destroy it. The finely crafted weapon in his arsenal is *covetousness*; and, with it, he seeks to fill our eyes and thus our hearts with the *things* of his realm. “For we are not ignorant of his devices” (2 Corinthians 2:11). Perhaps you are not aware of it, but Satan is after your soul! If you have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior, then your roots are to be in Him.

Colossians 2:6-7 So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him, ⁷ rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

You should be aware by now that faith becomes stronger through hearing and heeding the Word of God. It stands to reason then that Satan will seek to change our ability to *hear God*. If we are not *hearing* the Word of God, our faith is faltering. If our faith is faltering, we will be unable to quench *all* the fiery darts of the Devil. If we are unable to quench *all* the fiery darts of the Devil, we stand a good chance of being wounded, and perhaps, even mortally wounded. What does all this have to do with coveting? Just this, *covetousness* attacks your heart's ability to hear God. The Covenant of the Cross heals us to hear God's Word. What fruit are you eating? Is it from the tree that is pleasant to the eyes, the one which will bring personal/earthly gain? Or are you eating from the tree that is the tree of Life: The Cross of Christ?

Prayer of Forgiveness:

Holy Father, what can I say? I am so sorry for all the ways I have broken Your Holy Law. I have been too focused on the temporal areas of my life and have not truly listened for Your voice. Because of the sin of covetousness, there have been times when I *could not* hear Your voice because of the hardness of my heart. I pray with the Psalmist: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, one that you will not despise ... wash me again in the precious blood of Jesus and make me clean," in Jesus' name and for Your sake, Amen.