

Part Seven: The Second Table of the Law, Part 3

Written by Bob Stone

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—v. 17.

Coveting is a disease ever-present in the soul of humanity. The command forbidding it is, in fact, inextricably linked to the second commandment, because coveting implies we have elevated something or someone over God in our lives. Of course, we recognize it as inappropriate for a Christian, but the truth is we all have struggled with this command. This is why Paul addressed it in his letters to the Christians in Ephesians, Colosse and Romans.

In Romans he acknowledges the struggle with coveting in his past:

Rom. 7:6-8—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.

Eph. 5:3. Speaking of a simile for coveting, Paul writes: "But among you there must not be even a hint of... greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.

Col. 3:5—"Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

So should you fill out those little forms from Ed McMahon? If you want to and can resist the greed and covetousness easily attached to it, go for it. But if on Super Bowl Sunday you go into an envy fit when someone else wins the prize, and adopt a "poor old me" attitude, then save the price of a stamp—protect your heart.

Jesus also said in Luke 12:15, *"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.* " And

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John wrote in 1 John 2:15-17,

"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."

Ron Mehl, in his book *The Ten(der) Commandments* (p. 281), tells of a woman who won a \$48.6 million sweepstakes. "After winning, the woman said, 'We had one month of good times—and three years of misery. I'd trade it all for a normal life. It's not worth it. Health and happiness is what I want.' The woman...is a recovering alcoholic and tranquilizer abuser. She has had three pacemaker operations since her big lottery win. ...her husband writes, 'More bad than good came out of this.' [He] filed for divorce several months after the big win, and legal bills have topped over \$200,000 on both sides."

If we receive what we covet, we may not be happy with the results.

The word "covet" in Hebrew is "hamad," which is not a bad word by itself, because it simply means "desire." In the Ten Commandments, however, it is evil, so the word can be translated "lust," or "passionate longing," i.e., a severe craving for a possession or a person. This is not referring to a casual "wouldn't it be nice if..." expression. This coveting is strong: "I want what you have because I feel that is what will satisfy me and make me happy"—Ron Mehl, *The Ten(der) Commandments*, p. 28. So we understand we are not to lust after what is our neighbor's (R. Kent Hughes, *Disciples of Grace*, p. 172). This commandment doesn't prohibit desiring to have a wife, a husband, or a home; it forbids craving *your neighbor's* mate, home, cars, furniture, or lifestyle.

We'll return to the results of coveting in a moment, but first it is helpful to understand the source. **The source of coveting is the heart.** This command differs from the others, because it forbids not an action, but an attitude. Coveting represents a state of mind, so no one will initially know if we commit the sin. We can hide it in our hearts at least for awhile, but eventually it will eat us up on the inside and play itself out in action.

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Micah 2:1-2 shows how desire, craving, and lust for things will eventually break out into action of some kind. *"Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance."*

So the source of coveting is the heart, eventually expressing itself in action. This is one reason the Lord says, "you shall not covet... anything that is your neighbor's." He knows its negative results.

Coveting will potentially hurt others, as well as ourselves—James 4:1-2. Eventually coveting, lust, longing, greed has its day. The nature of coveting is that when it finds a target, we take from someone to have what we want. Somewhere along the line, coveting hurts others, sometimes irreparably. For example, James reminds us that in a church, coveting can cause fights, wars and hurts. James 4:1-2—

"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God."

What we covet will not last nor bring us happiness—2 Cor. 4:18; Matt. 6:19-21; Eccl. 5:11. If things desired are inappropriately gained or the result of greed and coveting, their allure will not last. Paul reminds us of the proper target (2 Cor. 4:18): *"So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."* Jesus said any other possession or treasure will be destroyed. Matt. 6:19-21—

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

- Clothes won't last.
- Toys won't last.

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- Improper sexual relationships won't last.
- Houses won't last.
- Money won't last.

Most people, in fact, spend all they have, no matter their income. Eccl. 5:11 (TLB)—*"The more you have, the more you spend right up to the limits of your income."*

The NIV reads,

"As goods increase, so do those who consume them."

Tell me how much it will matter what we have accumulated when we see Jesus face-to-face. Everything will pale in His presence; all we have acquired will not matter, unless we have placed the bulk of our treasures in heaven. If we don't accept that all we have is from God and we are just stewards, most often the stuff we acquire will slip through our hands, or give us little lasting joy.

How many times have you heard someone say, "The best years of our lives were when we had very little and relied on God for our everyday needs?" This doesn't mean we have to be poor to be happy, but it points out that our possessions will not assure happiness and contentment.

One time Nancy and I had \$5 with one week left in the month, and no food in the house. Wow! It was fun to see how God supplied us with TV dinners at 5 for \$1. Boy, are those days gone; nowadays I doubt you could find **one** TV dinner for \$1. We laughed that whole week. It was great!

The "prize" for our coveting will be a burden to us and possibly our family, too—Psalm 51. Not only will what we covet *not bring us happiness*, but God knows how *burdensome* the things we covet can become in our lives. Once we have acquired what we have coveted, the weight can press on us, squeeze us into a place of anxiety or heavy responsibility we did not anticipate. It's easy to focus on what we desire; but our eyes can be so clouded with that desire, we don't see all the burdens that will come with the prize we seek!

David of the Old Testament, for example, coveted his neighbor's wife. Since he had the authority, he took her, but Psalm 51 tells us the price he paid for the prize of his desire.

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Psalm 51:3-4—*"For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight..."*

If we read through the story of David's life after his adultery with Bathsheba, we see his whole family also paid a terrible price. There was rape, murder, incest, disgrace, betrayal, rebellion... it went on and on. David thought the person he coveted would bring him joy, but even though he was forgiven, the consequences were immense.

Covetousness is destructive—1 Tim. 6:6-10. One of the best passages to illustrate this result is found in Paul's words to his young assistant, Timothy.

1 Tim. 6:6—*But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.*

What we covet is often expressed in a desire to become rich, but Paul points out in very graphic detail the downside of the desire to get rich. Some might say: "I don't want to get rich; I just want to have my needs met, my bills paid and a little extra. That's all I want." But you know, even that desire for a little more can be influenced by coveting and can become a sin if it becomes a main focus of the heart. If we become very discontented and our desire for "just a little more" is much greater than the desire for gain that comes from godliness and contentment, we will acquire a covetous heart.

Paul tells Timothy that people who long to get rich begin to do all kinds of things that will bring them and their families hurt. "They work and scheme and squeeze themselves dry to acquire what they think will bring them happiness. But in the end, they don't have any time or energy for the people who are truly important... the people they love the most" (Ron Mehl, p. 234).

This warning doesn't mean we can't save for items we want, or work for better living conditions or position. Paul's message isn't an anti-success command! He is saying that if the priority of getting rich is greater than our commitment to godliness and contentment, the results will be destructive: falling into temptation and a trap; foolish and harmful desires; and wandering from the faith and being pierced with many griefs.

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First Timothy is very instructive to us, for it not only shows the negative side of coveting; it gives us the positive "yes" we can put in its place.

As we have seen with the other nine commandments, we need to put off the *no*, and put a positive *yes* in its place. In other words, we need to put off coveting and put another priority, another person, another provision, and another purpose.

Another priority. 1 Timothy 6:6 tells us, "*But godliness with contentment is great gain.*" This passage reminds us, there is nothing more important to a healthy Christian than living a godly life and being content. That is his greatest priority, and when it is realized, Paul says a believer has achieved great gain. With this priority, a person's values will automatically be different, therefore he will know whatever material possession he acquires will not go with him when he leaves this life.

"For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it."—v. 7.

This verse doesn't imply that a person with this priority doesn't have possessions or meaningful relationships, but he will keep them in perspective, seeing what he has in light of eternity. "*But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.*"

—v. 8.

David Robinson, superstar center for the San Antonio Spurs, spoke about watching Michael Jordan embrace the Chicago Bulls' first championship trophy "as if a piece of metal could validate a life." Robinson thought, "Here I am, with five cars, two houses and more money than I ever thought I'd have. What more could I ask for? But where am I going? Here's Michael Jordan. He has more than me and boy, I'd like to have some of the things he has. But is the world setting a trap for us?"

"What I had should have been plenty," he adds. "But no matter how much I had, it didn't seem like enough because material things can't satisfy our deepest needs. That's when I started to realize that I needed the Lord"—David Hubbard, *Faith in Sports: Athletes and Their Religion On and Off the Field* (New York, NY: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1998).

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I don't know how he is doing now, but his conclusion was right.

- **Another person.** *"Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God."*

—1 Tim. 6:17. It's so obvious: those who have been cured of coveting have replaced their hope in wealth with a hope in God. Their passion is not in uncertain wealth, whether they are rich, or poor, or in-between. The passion of their life is for God, the person of their hope, the passion of their life. When God is their hope, look what happens. We receive:

- **Another provision.** 1 Tim. 6:17b— *"...put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."*

When provisions and people and possessions come through His hands, notice the result. The things and people
God

provides are richly given for our enjoyment. Oh, so often we miss the enjoyment that could be ours because our hope is in wealth, i.e., a hope for a little more to a lot more wealth. Mark it down: people (even Christians) who covet are missing the simple pleasures and enjoyment of God. Here's a wonderful perspective from Ron Mehl (pp. 237-238).

People say, "When I get that car, then I'll really be happy." Or "When I find that right person and get married, then I'll finally be happy." Or "When we finally get some children, we'll get along better and we'll be happy." Or "When we finally get that vacation home in the mountains, we'll all do things together as a family, and we'll be happy."

Can your family have just as much fun in a tent as in a Winnebago? Could life be just as full bouncing along in an old Jeep as in a \$40,000 Ford Expedition? Can a husband and wife who delight in one another enjoy a dinner of hot dogs and beans by candlelight as much as stuffed pheasant with plum sauce under glass in some five-star restaurant? Can you tell time with a ten-dollar Timex as well as you can with a thousand-dollar Rolex?

Discontentment really has very little to do with *what you have*. If you are unhappy and believe that marriage is going to make you happy, you are deceived. If you are not satisfied, happy, and fulfilled in who you are, where you are, and what you have, changing your circumstances will not be an instant ticket to joy. How disappointed and dissatisfied we can become when we realize that the things we finally possess after long waiting are not the things that bring satisfaction or lasting contentment to our lives.

On the other hand, when the pursuit and person are right, then the provision of God is very

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enjoyable. Don't miss His provision; it will bring joy not only now, but for eternity. Heaven is going to be filled with people who were normal, average folks as far as material possessions are concerned, but have enormous treasures in heaven.

How can we be assured our pursuit, passion, and provision will last for eternity? How can we take what we have and store up treasures for the coming age and permanently cure the temptation to covet?

- **Another purpose.** *"Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life"*
—1 Tim. 6:18-19.

I'm not sure how this all works spiritually, emotionally and economically. All I know is, the cure for a coveting heart, arrogance, or hope in uncertain wealth is taking the attention off ourselves and establishing another purpose. Rather than living for ourselves, our new purpose is to live a life of service, doing good: "being rich in good needs...being generous and willing to share." Whether we have a little or a lot, when the pursuit, person, provision and purpose is right, then a coveting spirit is hard to maintain. We will have neither desire or time to covet, but will be enjoying what God has provided and sharing the joy with others.

So let's do an inventory of our hearts:

1. What is our **pursuit**? Is it godliness and contentment?
2. Who is the **person** and **passion** of our life? Is our hope in God through Jesus Christ?
3. Where is our **provision** coming from? Is it from the rich provision of God designed for our enjoyment?
4. How will we prevent coveting from returning? Is it through developing a new **purpose** for our life—living a life of generosity and giving to others?

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Let's ask the Holy Spirit to invade the areas of your heart that no one knows about. Your prayer might be: "Lord, will you reveal the inappropriate fantasies, desires, dreams, scenarios; the less-than-honorable hopes I have for wealth, destructive relationships, and experiences. Show me the hopes I have for escape, the death or removal of a spouse; the riches I long for and any discontent I have with my present situation", etc.

Some may think it doesn't matter what we covet, because our desires and fantasies are not harming anyone. Others may think we have no choice but to carry out the covetous desire in our hearts. But I want you to think about the ways you have held yourself from your mate, your family, your children, your job, your friends, and your God because you have coveted and not learned the secret of contentment, and because you have been unhappy and dissatisfied. I want you to consider other options such as communication, counseling, loving confrontation, forgiveness, renewal of love, a fresh start, support groups, prayer, Scripture, healing, etc.

In any community there are numerous people desiring to live another life, or in the words of the tenth Commandment, they are coveting a life that others have. They are dissatisfied, internally envious of others, very unhappy. As of this moment, however, it is all locked up in the heart. These locked-up feelings need to be confronted before they break out into action. Are you willing to confess your coveting and learn to trust God for the desires of your heart?

Well, good going! You finished the 10 commandments. What a great study this has been. One more observation remains, however, if we are to get the full picture. Study our lesson on [The People's Response to the Law](#) with us.