

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO REDEEMS

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 20:17

To understand more about the tenth commandment and its implications for us today.

Coveting Is *Wrong*... or Is It?

Exodus 20:17 highlights the final, tenth commandment, which prohibits the coveting of essentially anything that belongs to your neighbor. The emphasis is usually placed on the “coveting” part of this commandment, but this slightly misses the nuance of the command. This week, we will work through the tenth commandment with special attention to what the word “covet” means and what, more specifically, the heart of the tenth commandment actually is.

Read the Text:

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's. (Exodus 20:17, ESV)

Study the Text:

It's More About the Object

The word “covet” in Hebrew is חָמַד (hāmāḏ), and it is translated a number of different ways throughout the Old Testament. It's a word that, in a positive sense, means something like “to desire, delight in,” and in a negative sense, is often translated as “to lust after, to covet.” For example, in the creation narrative in Genesis 2, God “made to spring up every tree that is *pleasant* to the sight and good for food” (Gen. 2:9). That the trees were “pleasant” (hāmāḏ) is not a negative thing, but a positive thing. The trees were *desirable*. You could say that they were made in such a way as to be *coveted*. In Psalm 19:7, the psalmist declares: “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul!” He continues in verse 10: “More to be *desired* are they than gold, even much fine gold.” Again, it could be said that the laws and decrees of God are to be *coveted* more than gold. There are a number of examples in the Old Testament where the act of “coveting” or “desiring” something is not a bad thing but actually a *good thing*. The tenth commandment, then, doesn't necessarily focus on coveting but rather on *the object* of what is being coveted.

What about Paul's words in Romans 7:7? Paul writes: “For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’” Is Paul simply stating that coveting, in general, is wrong? No. For one, we know he's quoting the tenth commandment because he tells us as much. But the same linguistic principle that we witnessed in the Old Testament Hebrew applies to the New Testament Greek as well. The term “covet” in Greek is ἐπιθυμία (epithumia), and it can refer to either a positive or negative desire. For example, the Lord Jesus says in Luke 22:15: “I have earnestly *desired* to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.” The word “desire” is the same underlying word as “covet” in Romans 7:7. Context dictates whether it is positive or negative.

It's All About Your Neighbor

As mentioned in last week's lesson, the fifth commandment through the end is a continuation of sorts, wherein, specifically, the eighth, ninth, and tenth commandments are about the various ways in which we ought to respect our neighbor's property. The eighth commandment prohibits stealing our neighbor's belongings. The ninth commandment prohibits us from bearing false witness against him in any manner. Finally, the tenth commandment even limits us from coveting that which already belongs to our neighbor, and that really is the point of it; we are not to desire that which does not belong to us but rightly belongs to someone else. Frame rightly notes that, like the other commandments, the tenth commandment focuses on the heart. He writes: "So the tenth commandment vindicates Jesus' reading of the Decalogue. The focus on the heart is not a New Testament innovation. It is also an Old Testament concern. From the beginning, God wanted Israel to write his words on her heart (Deut. 5:29; 6:5–6; 10:16; 11:18; etc.). And the tenth commandment forms a fitting climax to the Decalogue by reducing all sin to the motives of the heart."¹

Again, we will look to the Westminster Larger Catechism for ideas about how to think more thoroughly about what this commandment requires of us and forbids us from doing.

WESTMINSTER LARGER CATECHISM

Question 147 asks what are the duties required in the tenth commandment, and it answers: "The duties required in the tenth commandment are such a full contentment with our own condition, and such a charitable frame of the whole soul toward our neighbor, as that all our inward motions and affections touching him, tend unto, and further all that good which is his." The Divines give a much shorter account in this commandment section, but no more really needs to be said. The tenth commandment demands us to have full contentment in our own condition and to do everything to "further all that good" that belongs to our neighbor.

Question 148 asks what are the sins forbidden in the tenth commandment, and it answers: "The sins forbidden in the tenth commandment are discontentment with our own estate; envying and grieving at the good of our neighbor, together with all inordinate motions and affections to anything that is his." Again, this is unusually short and to the point, but it is still effective. Being discontent with our own estate is the doorway towards coveting something that does not belong to me. When I begin to see myself as a victim because I do not possess that which I desire, it will make it much easier for me to yearn after those things that do not belong to me and even resent the people around me who possess them.

FURTHER DISTINCTIONS

So how do we know the difference between positive and negative desire? I mentioned earlier that context dictates this, but what is context dictating? Ultimately, any kind of desire that leads to the violation of God's law is the covetousness that the tenth commandment forbids. Frame has a nice way of making this distinction: "It is not wrong, say, for Chuck to desire a sexual relationship with Alice, given that both are single. That is a God-given incentive toward marriage. It is wrong for him to desire sex with her apart from marriage, for that is a desire to violate God's law. Similarly, it is not wrong for Louise to admire a beautiful vase in someone else's home, or even to wish that it were hers. It would be wrong for her to wish that she could steal it."²

¹ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 845.

² Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 846.

Douma provides a helpful sequence for how this might unfold. First, there is a “spontaneous desire,” one that perhaps even catches you off guard. Second, you begin to nurse that desire and allow for it to grow. Third, you make a plan to achieve the desire. Finally, fourth, you accomplish it. Douma notes that “coveting” per the tenth commandment takes place in stages two and three.³ I think this is more or less accurate. There are times when the desires of the sinful heart flare up unwarranted. There is nothing you can do about that but “take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). If you don’t, it can lead to further distress and the breaking of God’s commandments. James, the half-brother of Jesus Christ, illustrates this well: “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” Desire, when left unchecked, gives birth to sin in our lives, which matures into an adult and brings death to us.

What About Now?

The primary takeaway is the importance of contentment. If one can remain content with all that God has given him/her, the desire to take that which does not belong to you will diminish. If, on the other hand, you are not content, you will open yourself up to a world of envy, resentment, and ultimately pain. The tenth commandment reminds us to avoid such thoughts. Another takeaway is the importance of evaluating our desires and taking the negative ones captive to the obedience of Christ, lest they produce sin in our lives.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 20:17. What does the commandment actually say?

2. According to the notes, what does the commandment actually forbid?

Day Two

1. When is a desire for something considered negative?

2. Read 2 Corinthians 10:5. How does this verse apply to Exodus 20:17?

Day Three

1. How important is contentment to keeping the tenth commandment? Why?

³ Jochem Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996), 340; see also Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 846-47.

2. Read Hebrews 13:5. How can a Christian fight against discontentment?

Day Four

1. Read Philippians 4:13. How did Paul the apostle learn contentment?

2. Read 1 Timothy 6:6-8. What does Paul say is “great gain,” and why?

Discuss the Text!

Week 57 Discussion: Contentment

The big takeaway from this session is the importance of contentment. Contentment in what I have protects me from desiring what I don't have in a manner that violates God's law. It prevents me from looking at other things that my neighbor possesses and wanting them for myself. Talk as a group about your own contentment (or discontentment) and what you need to do to take the discontent thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ.

1. Icebreaker: What's one thing you wish you had?
2. Would other people say you are generally a content person?
3. Do you feel content with your life right now? If not, why not?
4. How often do you practice gratitude for the things you *do* have?
5. What is something you are grateful for today?
6. What steps can you take to fight against feelings of discontentment?
7. Kid Talk (For Home): Talk to your kids about the importance of being grateful for the things we have and not dwelling on that which we do not possess. You can also talk about how material things inevitably break, age out, and become useless. Our value ought to always be on relationships over things.

Takeaways:

1. The tenth commandment prohibits us from desiring things that belong to another person.
2. The underlying issue is really both contentment with our life and respect for others' lives.