

You Shall not Covet

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Bible Text: Colossians 3:1-11
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We're going to look at the tenth commandment with the help of Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 44. Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 44, Question and Answer 113 through 115. There it says,

Q. 113. What does the tenth commandment require of us?

A. That even the smallest inclination or thought, contrary to any of God's commandments, never rise in our hearts; but that at all times we hate all sin with our whole heart, and delight in all righteousness.

Q. 114. But can those who are converted to God perfectly keep these commandments?

A. No: but even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of this obedience; yet so, that with a sincere resolution they begin to live, not only according to some, but all the commandments of God.

Q. 115. Why will God then have the ten commandments so strictly preached, since no man in this life can keep them?

A. First, that all our lifetime we may learn more and more to know our sinful nature, and thus become the more earnest in seeking the remission of sin, and righteousness in Christ; likewise, that we constantly endeavor and pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we may become more and more conformable to the image of God, till we arrive at the perfection proposed to us, in a life to come.

Dear congregation, this afternoon we are considering the last commandment: you shall not covet. Now, this commandment sounds similar to all of the other ones. It starts with that familiar refrain: you shall not. And yet it's so very unique as a commandment. You see, it could be possible for a very literal person like perhaps one of those Pharisees you read about who speaks to the Lord Jesus Christ, it was possible for them to go through the first nine commandments and to say to the world, "I have never done that. I've never gone

to a false temple and worshiped an idol in one of those shrines that the Gentiles have," he might say. "I've never sworn." In those days, some of them, they literally did not say the name Jehovah just to make sure that they didn't take God's name in vain. And so they might think they had never broken that commandment and they might be able to say they never stole, they never murdered or committed adultery. They might say, "I never lied in a courtroom," and they could prove according to their own standard of righteousness like that young man in Matthew 19:20, "All these things I have kept from my youth." He actually thought he had kept all of the ten commandments but actually when we come to this tenth one, it should force us to go beyond the external and the superficial, the "I'm thinking we are pretty good," to examining the matters of the heart and of the mind, and as we will see when we get to the bottom of this commandment, it forces every one of us and it should force every one of you today to confess, "I am a sinner." Our motives, our instincts, our thoughts, even our impulses.

We're going to look at this under the simple theme "You Shall not Covet." We'll first look at how covetousness is the seed of many sins, the seed or the root of many sins, and then we'll move on to looking at some applications on how to battle covetousness, how to fight against his.

Well, it's good to go back even with many of the ten commandments but especially this one, it's good to go back to the very beginning of the Bible, back to creation and the fall, and to see how covetousness began, and even to see how there at the beginning it's really the seed of sin, it's at the root. In Genesis 1, man, Adam was given a job to do. He had to have dominion over the earth. He had a very high calling. He had a lot of freedom. He only had that one rule. He didn't have the other nine commandments yet, but in a sense you can see that this commandment is at the root, it's already there in a basic way. There were not the ten "you shall nots," but there was this one, "You shall not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

Now, it's helpful to picture that garden of Eden. It says there in Genesis 2 that God planted it specifically for Adam. Now, imagine if the Lord God planted this garden and imagine sitting there in that garden going back all those years and there's this garden that's full of fruit trees. Every tree that's pleasant to the sight, it says. Every tree that's good for food, chapter 2, verse 9. Imagine sitting in a garden and there is no rottenness, there are no spots on the fruit. You don't even have to check. You pull a fruit off a tree, you eat it and every one you bite into, it's good and it's ripe. Then there's this one tree that Adam was told, "You shall not eat of that tree."

That means that this last commandment really in a sense, it had to be broken for the fall to occur. Somebody had to want to eat of that tree and when Eve looks at that tree, it's very clear in Genesis 3:6, the tree looked good for food, it was pleasant to the eyes, and it was a tree desirable to make one wise. That word "desirable" is the word "covet." It's the same root. Eve saw that tree. She coveted it. She took and she ate and Adam saw the same. You see, Adam went through the same. He also wanted it. You see, the seed or the root of the fall, it really was already in coveting. She saw it was desirable. She wanted something that she didn't have.

Adam and Eve, they were something like a toddler. If any of you have had small children in the house or you have them, you know if there's something on the table and you tell them not to touch it, maybe it depends a little bit on their personality but many of them, it instantly becomes fascinating to them. There is the one thing they can't touch and, of course, they want to touch it. They want to go to it right away. They want to see what it is. And if you go back to Satan's temptation, it was not just about a temptation to get a fruit that they couldn't have, it was much deeper than that. His final lure, his final tag line to convince Eve and then Adam to take this fruit was, "You will be like God, knowing good and evil." And the real temptation was not to just have a fruit that they hadn't had before, to try something new, but it was to take the place of God; to have that knowledge of good and evil; to be their own gods, even in a sense, as we read Colossians 3, covetousness which is idolatry.

They wanted to be God and that's the root problem of covetousness. You see, when we allow covetousness, wanting the things we don't have to begin to grow and to rule in our hearts, we begin to think of it, what we're doing is, what we're saying, "I want to rule over my life. I want to change my circumstances. I want to surround myself with all the things I don't have right now, with all the things God has not given me." It's the very opposite of contentedness, the opposite of contentedness with the gifts God has given us, with the situation he's put us in, with the restrictions he's put around us and there are two lessons we should take from this. One is that God's will and God's law is timeless. As we've gone through this series of the ten commandments, up north where I'm a pastor, we've looked at how you can see really the seeds of all of the ten commandments already in Genesis 1, 2 and 3. They're all there and one thing we need to understand is that the law of God, it's not just for people of one era or one time, it's not just for the Jewish people, his word is the same yesterday, today and forever. Covetousness was a sin from the beginning and it's a sin now and the same is true for all of the commandments.

But we also see in the fall just how covetousness, like the Catechism explains that we read, how covetousness is at the root of all these other sins: false worship or Sabbath breaking or murder or adultery or theft or lying. Those are sins that are committed with covetousness at their root. They're committed because people are unhappy with what they have. That's why you steal something. That's why somebody goes out and commits adultery. That's why they murder. And we have to grasp that, that it begins with covetousness in our heart.

Well, it will help us to see perhaps if we can get a definition of covetousness that we can wrap our minds around. What exactly is it to covet? Well, some people sort of raise and lower the bar on covetousness and they especially lower it. Roman Catholic theologians especially, they have taught, some of them in the past, that coveting is sort of a second level of desire. It's not the original tiny lusts and the dis-contentedness and the desires so much that we have, but covetousness is when you really set your heart on something. Others lower the bar even further. They claim to covet is actually to make a plan to steal something. It's to see your neighbor's things, something that you don't have and it's to start the process of working out a plan and so they lower the bar even further. And when

you start to think of covetousness that way, if covetousness is just actually making a plan to go out some night and take your neighbor's ATV or whatever it is, if it's actually making a plan, well, that's how you can get somebody like the young man who talked to Jesus and he was able to say to the Lord Jesus, "Well, these things I've kept since my youth," because they had set the bar so low. They had said, "Well, it's really to make a plan to steal." And some of them would even say, "Well, you haven't really coveted unless you carried out the plan. If you actually go out and steal something, well, then you really coveted." Covetousness only happens if you really go and steal something. But the reality is that this commandment is far more convicting than that. As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it, it's the smallest inclination or thought or desire to break God's law. Coveting is the desire to have different things, a different life, different stuff, different things, different than God has given us.

Now, it's not to say that every desire, of course, that we have in our life is covetous. Certainly there are such things as good and natural and normal desires. We'll go through some of those later but if a child is hungry for food, they're legitimately hungry and they ask for food, we don't call that covetousness. That's simply hunger. That's a good and a healthy desire even in a way. So quickly it can become sinful, we know that, but covetousness is the smallest inclinations and thoughts, these desires to break the law of God because we want different things than God's given us.

And when we start to examine our hearts and to think about our thoughts in this way, we should start to think like the Apostle Paul. Romans 7:7-8, he says, "I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire." You see, as a Christian matures and as they come to know God's law and as they begin to study it and they begin to apply it to their heart, they'll begin to realize more and more as they grow and as they know the law and as they mature, they realize more and more they have these impulses to break it, these desires to have what's not theirs.

And you might remember those impulses also as a young person. You learned about a rule maybe and some of you had the personality you instantly wanted to push the limits simply because you wanted to be in charge. And that's why, again, Colossians 3:5 can say covetousness is idolatry. It's these desires to overrule God's, replace what he's given us with what we want, and every time we sin, it's a covetous thought, it's a desire that starts that ball rolling.

Now, if you as a Christian are trying to battle against sins in your life, this is really important to realize: that it's covetousness that's at the seed; it's your desires that are at the seed of other sins. That's why, because you must fight spiritual warfare in your mind, in your prayer life, in your personal devotions, taking every thought captive for Christ. James 1:14 says, "each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death."

It's the desire in your heart that first leads to the sin. You can think of covetousness almost being like a gravity, like a force that pulls us downward toward the swirl and causes us to desire all of the things of this world. It's like a spiritual gravity and it brings our thoughts down to this world and that's why Colossians 3 can say, "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above." Set your mind on things above, not on this earth because there is this natural desire in our flesh, and even often in our very hormones, in our very flesh itself, and it's causing us to desire to covet all these things around us and it pulls us down to this earth and it gives birth to sin and in the end when it's full-grown, that brings death and we need to take that pull seriously. It leads to death. And we need to hold ourselves responsible in that first instance of covetousness.

So now we move on to how do we stand against it? How do I battle covetousness when that thought goes through my mind? When you drive past the dealership of when you see the advertisement, how do you battle against it? Well, we'll look at that secondly. If you examine your hearts, I'm sure all of us can think of more than a few covetous thoughts we've had or even entertained. Just think back through your day today. If you're honest with yourself, the sighs, the discontent, the grumpiness with things not going our way, perhaps the dis-contentedness with a spouse or with a child. And for the mature Christian, they want to be content. They desire, they have that feeling of the Apostle Paul in Romans 7, they hate this body of death. They want to fight off that sin but it seems, if you've tried to fight this battle of covetousness, doesn't it seem sometimes it's like you're trying to plug the holes in the wall that's leaking and you're trying to plug one hole and then another springs a leak, and then another, and another, and you fight off one sin or one desire in one area of your life, then another comes and takes its place. And maybe you've grown past some youthful desires that had such a power over you as a teenager and you kind of breathe a sigh of relief as you mature. But then as you get older, you have to deal with aches and the pains and some of maybe the grumpiness that comes and you realize that a whole new set of sins and covetousness and inclinations, it clings to you.

Well, in our battles with desires, we can't actually begin with just some practical steps first because as the Apostle Paul wrestled with in Romans 7, if you're familiar with that passage, you know he wrestled with that in the end he failed again and again. The desires of his flesh rose up, the old man, the body of death. He tried to go back to his old ways and we can fight against that old man but we'll always realize this guilt. That's why Paul cried out, verse 24, Romans 7:24, "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

That's what we need to begin. In our battle with covetousness, we must begin with the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ alone was able to battle covetousness. Imagine the Lord Jesus Christ as he walked this earth, not one covetous thought. Not a single sinful desire. Even the very opposite, actually. If you read a passage like Philippians 2 it says the the Lord Jesus Christ, his desire was to humble himself; to lay down his life. He had everything in heaven and he chose nothing. He chose to be cursed. He chose to become sin for us, to even go to the death of the cross, and what you need to see in that is that the Lord Jesus Christ, he's the exact opposite of Adam and Eve. You see, they went after that fruit to be

like gods. The Lord Jesus Christ, God himself, became man and went down to the cross, he took that cursed death of the cross. He's the exact opposite of a coveter and the Gospel, the good news for those that are discontented and for those that see this covetousness in their heart, is to first trust in him who became sin for us.

You see, you'll never earn God's favor by avoiding covetousness. This is a commandment that convicts and it hurts when you really think about it. From the seeds of it, you see it in the youngest, even babies, toddlers. They want more and more and more and their desires grow out-sized. Then you talk to a mature Christian who is suffering and they examine their hearts and they confess, "I desire so many things I used to have." Humanly this cannot, in the one sense, be beat and the battle must begin by trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ, by repenting, by confessing your inability. You cannot trust in your own ability to fight covetousness.

You must trust in Christ alone but then in dependence on the Holy Spirit, by his work, there is a battle to be fought and there is hope in that battle. Having started with Christ, repentance and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, trust that he never coveted and may that be your righteousness, but then there are steps that can be taken. There is a battle that can be fought against our own desires.

Well, the first step in the battle that we'll give today is to be sensitive. To understand that it really is a problem when we're covetous and that it really does lead to other sins and it really does drag us down like that gravity. The Lord Jesus Christ says, Luke 12:15, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses." Notice how strong that language is, "Take heed and beware." It's a double emphasis. It means, "Watch out. Keep your eyes open. Take heed." "Beware" means "be on guard; be a guard." Be ready to fight against covetousness. Think of a soldier, he stands on the city wall, that's the kind of person who takes heed and who will beware. His eyes are wide open. The sword or the bow is at the ready and he's looking for any hint of movement because he's already heard a message, "The enemies are on their way." And the idea is we need to take heed and beware. We need to be watchful in our hearts. The idea is covetousness is subtle. It sneaks up on you. Think of the snake in the garden. He was more subtle than any beast. He was crafty. He comes with small suggestions. So the first step in battling covetousness is to be aware, to be like a soldier who's on guard, to realize that this covetousness is really a problem. This is what drags me down again and again and again.

We also need to be aware just how serious covetousness is as we looked at in the first point. It is idolatry. It leads in the end, you almost go backwards through the ten commandments and it leads to denying the Lord God. You see, it's natural for us to think that the big sins are the most deadly ones: believing a false religion, buying into one of those violent and wicked religions that are in this world. We like to think that's the worst. That's terrible. Or somebody who murders. Or somebody who lies regularly. A cheater. Or somebody who's immoral. But you see, sins like covetousness, though they may just seem to be in the mind and you might think you can control them and you might think that you can live out your life and entertain covetous thoughts in your mind and some of

you, probably you've convinced yourself, "Well, what I let happen in my mind nobody will ever know and it's not going to hurt anything." Well, that's like having a bacteria or a cancer that you entertain in your life. It seems like a tiny and a microscopic problem. It seems that it's hidden but it grows and it grows into a life-threatening sickness as James says.

The symptoms, you must begin to recognize them and learn to recognize them at the very first inclinations. When your heart begins to be discontent with what you have, you must rebuke yourself. Repent. When you begin to lust after what you don't have and when those feelings come, you must not let them grow. The call is put them to death immediately. Your life does not consist in the abundance of things you have. Things don't give you a better life.

It's so easy, isn't it, to think, "If I could just have that next piece of equipment or that next car or house or vacation or another \$10,000, my life would be fine." Now, when those things are given by the Lord and if they're accumulated through times necessary tools through a life of hard work, there is certainly nothing wrong with that, but when they're accumulated through a life of covetousness, those possessions, they just add to the gravity. They become a weight and that abundance of things that you possess actually begins to drag you down. The more you have, the more you have to worry about. Where the Christian who receives blessings from the hand of God will be able to say, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

And that's why the Lord Jesus Christ says, "Seek first the kingdom of God." Trust him. Work for his glory. Go to work each day and go about your daily tasks ultimately to serve the Lord, trusting in him, using the work of your hands for his glory in the words of your mouth and whatever you're called to each day. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you," Matthew 6:33. Work for his glory and then trust him to provide what you need and at times, must learn to accept that what you need may often be the exact opposite of what you think you need and what you think you want.

We have to be watchful for covetousness but we also have to be sure that we're watching in the right directions; that we're seeking first the kingdom of God; that we're seeking the things which are above where Christ is; that we're setting our mind on the things above. We need to orient and reorient our direction and stop looking down and around us at this world and look up to Christ, trusting in him, confessing our sin. Looking to him.

Another helpful correction in the battle of covetousness is the attitude of Job when he first loses so many things. Again, "The Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Job 1:21, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD." You see, for somebody to speak that way, they have to understand, they have to have that heaven-ward focus. They have to understand that everything they have, it's not really theirs to begin with. It's a gift of God. They were a steward of it for a time but if the Lord

wishes to take things away from us just like a master can take things away from a servant, that's his right. That's his will.

And in order to battle covetousness, we have to know God. We have to realize we're not in control. We shouldn't be in control of what we get in this life. If we work hard, we do begin to gain things in this life, material things. Our situation begins to improve but that's only because the Lord has given us the strength and because the Lord has given us those things. You see, Job, he doesn't say, "Well, I worked really hard and I was a wise herdsman and so I gained these things and now the Lord has taken them away." No, he says, "The Lord gave. Blessed be the name of the Lord." And a willingness to let go, it's a sign when things are right. It's a sign that our hearts and our minds are focused on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, we know that Job struggled later as every person will. They'll struggle. If you lose a lot of things, if you go through a hard patch in your life, people do struggle. Job struggled later. You read through the book and he certainly did, but that understanding that all belongs to the Lord is foundational.

Now, another point that can be helpful in battling covetousness and it can be to be reminded that there is such a thing as a good desire. We don't claim as Christians that every single desire and everything we want is bad. Some people go in that direction. They become we call like an ascetic, like a monk. They think that every single desire that people have and if you could fast longer and longer and longer, why you would be more holy. No. The Lord has certainly implanted and given in us good desires. For someone to desire to be back home with their family because they're on a long business trip. Or for somebody to desire to be with their spouse. That's not wrong. In the Song of Solomon, love and desire between a bride and a groom, that's certainly not a sinful thing. There are many other desires. You go through the Bible: the desire to serve the Lord. If a man desire the position of a bishop, he desires a good thing, 1 Timothy 3. Or spiritual gifts. We're actually told, 1 Corinthians 12:31, earnestly desire the best gifts.

So understanding that there is such a thing as a good desire and there are holy desires, if we want to grow into a stronger Christian and if we want to be able to lead in the church, those are all very good things. And in fact, there's a certain hope in the truth that there are good desires because those good and those positive and those blessed desires can begin to take the place of the old desires. And they should. As a Christian grows and as they understand more and more what the will of God is, their thought life and their heart's desires now become the fruits of the Spirit, the best gifts. When they were fallen, there was desired fruit of rebellion and selfishness and sin. If you read Galatians 5, many people read there the fruits of the Spirit but then they forget that those fruits of the Spirit actually replace the works of the flesh, outward sins: adultery, idolatry, sorcery, but also lewdness, jealousy, selfish ambitions, envy, the stuff of covetousness. And the call in Galatians 5 is replace those old and replace those bad fruits with the fruits of the Spirit. Desire these things. Crucify, put to death the old desires. Put on the new.

And so what we desire in our deepest thoughts becomes a bellwether, it becomes a litmus test or like a thermometer. As a Christian grows, more and more they wish in their heart and their mind, they wish, "I could be more loving. I wish I could be more joyful. I wish I could be more peaceful and patient and kind and good. I wish I could be more faithful and gentle and self-controlled." And you see, there is this hope for the Christian in the work of the Holy Spirit, that as they truly begin to hate those sins and hate those old desires, that they'll grow in the fruits of the Spirit and they'll desire to take those good fruits into their life and to live for them and in them. And the great hope is not that we'd be fatalistic in that we'd sit back and simply say, "Well, if the Lord gives the Holy Spirit, I'll have these fruits," and wait. No, the Lord Jesus promises in Luke 11:13, "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

So the battle of covetousness, the answer is ultimately pray for the Holy Spirit. Pray that these fruits of the Spirit would replace your desires for the things on this earth. Pray that you would have more and more of a view of the need for the Lord Jesus Christ; that your faith would grow in the reassurances the heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him. And so in your battle against covetousness, be praying often and daily, "Lord, convict me of this sin. Guide me in the green pastures and the still waters. Show me the right fruits to bring into my life." Pray for the work of the Holy Spirit.

So in your battle against covetousness, look to Christ first. See how he is the opposite of coveting. And then the call is to take heed, beware. And the call is to understand you're a steward. The Lord may take these things away but ultimately in the end the answer is pray for the work of the Holy Spirit. Watch your heart. Seek first the kingdom. Amen.

Let us pray.

Lord God Almighty, our Father in heaven, we come to you and we confess that we've fallen prey to this sin of covetousness which is idolatry. We confess we loved the creation instead of the Creator. Lord, be merciful to us sinners. We pray that you would guide us in truth, that you would teach us. We come confessing the name of the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ and we thank you that he thought it not robbery to be equal with God but he made himself of no reputation, he took the form of a servant, the exact opposite of a covetous heart. And so we come in his name, pleading on his righteousness and his work that you be merciful to us sinners, but also that you would pour out your Holy Spirit upon us, that you would teach us more and more to flee covetousness and evil desires; that we would grow in grace; that we'd grow in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We especially pray for those who struggle with strong desires, times of weakness and pain and sickness where there is so much suffering, where there is a desire to be healed and to be helped and to be strengthened. We pray that you would bless them. We think of T. S. We pray for healing from that infection and that stroke. We pray for his wife Margaret, that you would bless and that you would strengthen them. We know, O Lord, that all things work together for the good of those that love the Lord and even as we

suffer, we pray that you would teach us to count it all joy when we face various trials, to know that our faith is being purified and strengthened.

We pray also for the works of local missions in this area. The Gems and the Cadets programs. The works that are done with children in the community. We pray for the work of Pastor Dan Walker in the high school, that you would bless him as he brings the Gospel to the young people there. We pray for each member of the church family as we go forward, that we would be faithful in speaking, in living out of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in everyday life.

We also ask that you would strengthen us, especially as we live in a world of materialism, a world that is so in love with things, with vehicles and electronics and homes. We see it all around us, the billboards and the television and what people live for and what we far too often live for. We pray that you would teach us to stand, to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and to trust that all these things will be added to us. We pray this all in the name of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.