

WEEK 11: DO NOT COVET

TENTH COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21



The Place of the Passage

The final commandment exposes the wrong attitude behind all the previously condemned behaviors. An earlier commandment already condemned adultery. This command makes clear that coveting another's spouse, whether or not that desire is acted upon, is wrong. Previous commands prohibited stealing or killing or making idols. The tenth exposes as evil the root of such deeds: self-love. The tenth commandment does not introduce another category of sin. Rather, it recapitulates all the previous commands and exposes the sinful heart behind their violation. Hatred might be the conceptual opposite of love, but the real enemy of loving God and others is loving oneself instead. And that is where the final commandment points its convicting finger. This is a command against the self-love (covetousness) behind all those other sins, showing that all the commandments of the Decalogue are given ultimately to teach us the heart and habits of godly love.

The Big Picture

The Decalogue confronts the sin of self-love so that we might learn to love God and others instead.

Reflection and Discussion

Read the tenth commandment from both Exodus and Deuteronomy. Also read Jesus' application of this commandment in Matthew 15:4–19. Use the following questions to help you consider the commandment's meaning and implications. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on pages 177, 340; online at www.esv.org.)

The two versions of this commandment contain subtle differences. One key difference is the use of the term “house.” The Exodus version was given when Israel lived in tents in the wilderness. It uses “house” in the sense of “household” to introduce a list of household members. Deuteronomy was given as Israel was about to settle Canaan. It uses “house” to mean a physical building, requiring a reordering of the list. What other differences do you notice between the commandment's two versions? What are the possible implications of these differences?

This command has an unusual style for a law. It uses a poetic form scholars call “parallelism,”¹ in which the same idea is stated twice in similar phrases. We encounter parallelism in the Psalms and in other poetic passages but not typically in laws. Why might a poetic style suit this unusual command that addresses one's heart attitude?

The commandment lists seven or eight items based on various components of households and vocations in ancient Israel. What are some items that might go on this list when applied today?

In coveting a neighbor's male and female servants someone might covet the strength and skilled labor that a neighbor utilizes as he conducts his household business. How does this exhortation speak to covetous temptations a business owner might face today?

Oxen and donkeys were the ancient equivalents of the tractors or other equipment used to operate a business today. How does the warning not to covet a neighbor's ox or donkey relate to modern household and business desires?

Coveting is not just about stuff; it is about relationships. Three times the commandment emphasizes that the objects coveted are "your neighbor's." How does coveting another's possessions reveal a lack of love for that neighbor?

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As with the other commandments, this “do not” also implies the opposite “do.” We are to desire good for our neighbor and to take delight in his success. What are one or two ways in which you can begin praying for the people whom you are most tempted to envy, that you might foster a genuine desire for their good?

In Romans 7:7–13 Paul writes about the corrupting nature of sin, which even hijacks God’s good laws and turns them into tools of temptation! Of all the laws Paul could have mentioned for this lesson, why do you suppose he quoted the tenth commandment? What does this choice teach us about the heart-level power of this commandment?

Jesus said to “love your neighbor *as yourself*” (Matt. 22:39; see Lev. 19:18). This instruction suggests there is a healthy kind of love for oneself that does not contradict love for a neighbor. What distinguishes a proper love for oneself from covetous self-centeredness?

The Scriptures encourage labor and increase as well as buying and selling, practices rooted in desire and the pursuit of that desire. What distinguishes a proper desire for gain from covetousness?

Paul writes that the desire for gain, that is, covetousness, is the root of “all kinds of evils” (1 Tim. 6:10). What kinds of things should we desire instead of selfish gain? (Note the context of Paul’s exhortation in 1 Tim. 6:6–11.)

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

GOD’S GOSPEL LOVE. The tenth commandment emphasizes the other- rather than self-focused love that motivates obedience to all of the commandments. It is not sufficient to restrain oneself from stealing a neighbor’s ox. One must not covet that ox. In fact, we should delight that our neighbor has a good ox to support his work. The tenth commandment shows that the ultimate purpose of God’s law is not works but love. And the command shows us the nature of God’s gospel love, which earnestly desires everything good for us.

JESUS KEPT THE TENTH COMMANDMENT. What might have happened if Jesus had enrolled in one of the leading schools of the Pharisees, climbing the

ladder of popularity among the synagogue leaders? Or what if he had attached himself to one of the scribal schools of the temple, pursuing a lucrative post among the temple elites? But Jesus never sought wealth or popularity. In fact, he spent great effort seeking to avoid crowds (Mark 1:35–39, 43–45) and declining prospects of power (John 6:15). Jesus came to love and to serve, even to the sacrifice of his own life. As it turns out, the religious leaders were envious of Jesus (Matt. 27:18), but Jesus was the epitome of selflessness. He kept the law perfectly, including the tenth commandment, making him the suitable substitute to achieve our atonement.

Whole-Bible Connections

DESIRE. Adam and Eve’s sin in the garden was the result of covetousness. Tempted by the serpent, “the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise” (Gen. 3:6). She took the forbidden fruit, and both she and Adam ate. The enigmatic sin precipitating the flood was also borne out of covetousness: “The sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose. . . . [Then] the LORD saw . . . that every intention of the thoughts of [humanity’s] heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:2–5). Lot’s decline began when he “lifted up his eyes and saw” the lush Jordan Valley and desired it for himself (Gen. 13:10). Throughout the biblical story, self-love and immoral desires are a frequent cause for sin—until the final judgment. Revelation 20 reminds us that evil desire began with the deception of “that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan,” and promises its end in his judgment (Rev. 20:2, 10).

DONKEYS AND OXEN. Donkeys and oxen were the stock beasts of burden in the Hebrew world. Oxen were typically yoked in pairs when plowing, threshing grain, or pulling a cartload. Donkeys were used to turn grinding wheels or to raise water from wells and also served as pack animals and modes of long-distance transportation. Sheep and goats were also important livestock, but these were not useful for labor. Beasts of burden like donkeys and oxen appear throughout the Law, in the Proverbs and Wisdom Literature, and throughout the history of Israel as symbols of power and wealth. The prosperity of Job was noted in his livestock, including “500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female donkeys” (Job 1:3). The significance of Elisha’s call to be a prophet was underscored by his sacrificing twelve yoke of oxen with which his household servants had been plowing (1 Kings 19:19). Issachar’s strength was celebrated by comparison to a donkey: “Issachar is a strong donkey, crouching between its saddlebags” (Gen. 49:14 ESV mg.). In these and other ways donkeys and oxen were highly valued and often coveted throughout the Bible.

Theological Soundings

PRAYER. The tenth commandment says nothing about prayer explicitly. But its exhortation to desire the best for one's neighbor is foundational for prayer. The apostle James warns that prayers motivated by covetousness are ineffective. "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (James 4:3). Instead, praying for oneself with contentment (1 Tim. 6:6–10) and for others with genuine desire for their blessing (Eph. 6:18) reveals a heart in tune with the demands of the tenth commandment.

SIN. As the conclusion of the Decalogue, the tenth commandment is not introducing a new category of wrongdoing. Rather, it points to the heart of sin² behind the violations of all the previous commandments. James writes, "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel" (James 4:2–3). Jesus teaches, "Out of the heart come evil thoughts," and those evil thoughts lead to "murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander" (Matt. 15:19). All of the commandments teach us about sin, but the tenth most poignantly exposes the self-love at the heart of sin.

Personal Implications

Considering what you have learned in this study, reflect on the Decalogue's tenth commandment as it informs your faith and instructs your faithfulness today. Make notes below on personal implications of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21

As You Finish This Unit . . .

If you are memorizing the Decalogue during this study, practice reciting the preface and all ten commandments. Pray to thank God for establishing his covenant with you, to redeem you and to make you holy.

Definitions

¹ **Parallelism** – A poetic device, employed in virtually all Hebrew poetry, that places together two or three concepts that are matching, opposing, or progressive in meaning. Essentially it is a “rhyming” of concepts rather than sounds, with the first line being restated in a slightly different way in the second line. An example is Psalm 51:7: “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.”

² **Sin** – Any violation of or failure to adhere to the commands of God, or the desire to do so.