

10th Commandment

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 May 2011

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Summer is approaching, and for some that means making holiday plans, and you have to choose between different alternative destinations. Maybe some of you are in the midst of that, or maybe some of you have already decided, will it be Blackpool or Budapest, will it be Razi or Rome, will it be Lewis or Lanzarote, and indeed there's a host of other possibilities for you to choose from, or maybe you'll decide just to stay at home. This morning I want to present to you a choice between two destinations, which in turn involve two journeys, two very different journeys with two very different destinations. Now what unites the two is the point of departure. There is a common point of departure on these two journeys with two very different destinations.

And the point of departure is the commandment that we will be considering this morning, the tenth commandment. In Exodus chapter 20, we read in verse 17 as follows, 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.

Now this may seem a curious thing to say that this commandment is the point of departure for two very different journeys with two very different destinations. But bear with me as we unpack or as we present to you how it is that this is indeed the point of departure for these two journeys.

More precisely, it is the breaking of this commandment that is the point of departure for these two journeys. Now in a moment, or in a few moments, we will describe the two journeys and their respective destinations.

But we begin by briefly considering what coveting is and some of its characteristics. You can consider this part of the sermon as packing for the journey. These two journeys that we're going to present to you as alternatives. Well, we have to do some packing first.

[2 : 35] And this packing involves discovering what this matter of coveting is all about. What is it? What does it mean to covet? Now, in doing this, we're going to think a little bit about the words that are used here in the original language.

It's not something I often do, largely because of ignorance on my part. But on this occasion, bear with me, because I think it will help us as we would get a good grip on what this is all about, this matter of coveting. The Hebrew word there in Exodus chapter 20 and verse 17 that is translated by our English word to covet is a word, hamad, hamad. Now, the basic meaning of this Hebrew word is to desire or to delight in. The word itself is morally neutral. I suppose all words are, in a sense, morally neutral. But what I mean by saying that the word is morally neutral is that the word can be used to describe both worthy desires and unworthy desires. The word itself can have both applications.

To illustrate, let's just go back to the passage that we read in Genesis, back to the Garden of Eden. We read there in chapter 2 and in chapter 3. And in both those chapters, this word, this same Hebrew word, hamad, is used. For example, in chapter 2 and in verse 9, as we have described for us this Garden in Eden that God had provided for Adam and Eve, we read there in verse 9, and the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground, trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. That word translated pleasing is the same Hebrew word, hamad, pleasing, desirable, a fruit that Adam and Eve could delight in. Now, this use of the word is to describe a God-designed and indeed a God-pleasing desirability.

It was right and proper that Adam and Eve should desire the fruit of these many trees. That is what God had intended. It was God's intention that they delight in this generous provision that He had made for them. It was God's intention that Adam would look at the fruit in those trees and say, that is good. I want to eat it. And He could eat it. It was good that He should desire that fruit.

But then we go to chapter 3. And in chapter 3 and in verse 6, we read, when the woman, when Eve saw that the fruit of the tree, now remember this tree is the tree in the middle of the garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, when Eve saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye and also desirable for gaining wisdom, there that word desirable is the same Hebrew word, chamath. But you see here it's very different. Yes, it's desirable, but the desire is for something that is forbidden. God had said to Adam and Eve, you can eat of all of these trees, but not from this tree. But Eve looks and it's desirable. It is a fruit that she feels she can delight in. She covet the fruit. Coveting is to desire that which is forbidden. Desire is good. We are created by God to desire. But to covet, certainly as it is used here in this commandment, is to desire that which is forbidden, to desire that which is not our own. Now again, I ask you to bear with me as we introduce the word itself before exploring these two journeys. And bear with me as we move forward from the Old Testament to the New Testament. And we will discover that in the New Testament, this dual potential of the word is preserved in translation from Hebrew to the Greek. For example, in Romans chapter 7 and verse 7, Paul makes reference, specific reference to this commandment, thou shalt not covet. And notice what he says in Romans chapter 7 and verse 7. And we'll be coming back to this when we embark on one of our two journeys. But for the moment, just notice what it says. In Romans chapter 7 and verse 7, what shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not. 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. So, Paul is quoting the Tenth Commandment. And the word that he uses, the Greek word that he uses, translated here, covet, is the Greek word epithumio. Now, those of you who have very good memories and who listen intently every Sunday may remember that some time ago we made reference to this word in connection with Romans chapter 1. But that's just an aside for any who maybe have a vague recollection of hearing about this word. The word Paul uses is epithumio. It means the same. It means to desire, to desire. And as with the Hebrew word hamad, it can be used for worthy desires or for unworthy desires. For example, you will recall the occasion in Philippians chapter 1 where Paul speaks of his desire to be with Jesus. He says, I desire to depart and to be with Jesus, which is better by far.

[8 : 24] This is the word that he uses. Epithumio. I desire, I intensely desire to be with Jesus, to be closer to Jesus. His desire isn't for death. His desire is to be with Jesus and he sees death as the means whereby he can be closer to Jesus. I desire to depart and to be with Jesus. This was his great desire.

A worthy desire. A worthy desire. A commendable desire. But then we have James in his letter. And he describes for us, again in a familiar passage, he describes for us there in the first chapter of his letter, temptation and its effects. And there he identifies, in James chapter 1 and verse 14. He identifies the starting point of a temptation. And what is it? What does he identify? Well, there we can notice in James chapter 1 and verse 14, and we will be returning to this verse as well in a moment.

Each one is tempted when by his own evil desire he is dragged away and enticed. The word there, or the two words in English, evil desire, is this Greek word *epithumio*. Indeed, in English, the translators have chosen to use two words and call it evil desire. But the actual word is desire. In this context, clearly an evil desire. So again, we find that this idea of desiring intensely, the word that we find in the commandment, you shall not covet, you shall not covet, the word itself can speak of a very legitimate and commendable desire, but also it can be used to describe evil desires, wicked desires, desires for that which is forbidden. So the word translated covet in the commandment means to desire. In the commandment, evidently it has been used of an unworthy desire, a forbidden desire. To covet is to desire in a selfish and intense manner something that belongs to another. The commandment gives examples. It speaks of your neighbor's house, of your neighbor's wife, of his servants, of his animals, of his belongings.

The language seems rather quaint and antiquated, servants and animals, but we don't relate to that in our society or in our context, but really it's speaking of the things that we also covet. Somebody else's wealth, somebody else's status, somebody else's power, somebody else's wife. These are very contemporary examples. The language may be antiquated to our ears, but the sin described is alive and well and so very contemporary if we were only just a little bit honest with ourselves.

So I think that gives us a better grasp by hope of the word itself that we understand or that is translated in our English Bibles as coveting. You shall not covet. But before we do embark on our two journeys or describe rather the two journeys, just a couple of other important features of this sin.

[11 : 46] One very important one to be clear on is that this sin is a sin of the heart and it is a sin exclusively of the heart. Unlike the other commandments that involve sinful actions, they do have also a heart component, but that involve actions to steal, to lie, to commit adultery, to murder, and so on and so forth.

This commandment prohibits something that is entirely a matter of the heart. To covet is a heart activity. That is important. We'll notice, I hope, in a few moments why it is important to be clear on that.

Now, of course, the sin of coveting does lead to, indeed is the drive behind further sins, sinful actions, indeed the breaking of all the other commandments. It was the first sin in the garden.

We've noticed that. And it continues to be in our own experience, the first sin in our sinful lives that then leads us on to a multiplicity of other sins. This is a characteristic of coveting, and it is the product of a dissatisfied heart. It is a heart sin, and it is the product of a dissatisfied heart. A satisfied heart has no need to covet, but a dissatisfied heart is ripe soil for coveting.

And one final thing before we describe our journeys. We are all guilty. I don't know your heart, but I don't need to know your heart because I know one thing. It's a human heart. And if it's a human heart, then it is a covetous heart. We are all guilty. Nobody here can stand up and say, nothing to do with me. For you are guilty, as I am guilty of breaking this commandment.

[13 : 49] Very well. We are packed and ready to go, or in any case to describe these two journeys that share a common point of departure, which is the breaking of this commandment. Our first journey that begins with coveting is a journey to death. A journey to death. Coveting can take you on this unhappy journey to death. The route traveled is traced for us in the passage that we have already noted, and that we will return to in James chapter 1 and reading from verse 13. Listen as I read this passage, and by all means, if you wish to look for it and read with me, you can do so. But certainly listen as I read these verses from James chapter 1. When tempted, no one should say, God is tempting me.

For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when by his own evil desire, his own epithumia, his own intense desire, He is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire is conceived, it gives birth to sin. And sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death.

The destination of this journey is identified for us at the end of these two verses. Death. The destination of this journey that begins with coveting, that begins with evil desires is death.

That is the terminus. That is the destination. Death. Not principally physical death, but spiritual death. Death. Spiritual death. An eternal and irreversible separation from God. This is the destination that begins with breaking this commandment. That begins with coveting. That begins with evil desires. James presents it to us this macabre journey to death. Where does it begin? Who takes us by the hand and leads us to eternal death?

Well, it is coveting. Each one is tempted when? By his own evil desire. My own evil desire. Your own evil desire.

[16 : 15] It's your desire. You're responsible. Nobody else's fault. Oh, but others tempt me. The world tempts me. It's your desire. You have to take responsibility for your evil desires. They're yours. They belong to you. And they are the ones that will lead you on this journey to death. That is where the journey begins.

And notice the power of your evil desires. They drag you. They entice you to do that which you ought not to do. To take that which is not yours.

Covetousness whispers in our heart. Come on. Have a look. Have a taste. Live your life. Just take what you want. You only live once.

You're only young once. It's so good. So attractive. So delicious. So much fun. Just go for it. And where does our coveting then take us? It takes us to sin. Sinful thoughts and sinful actions. We envy. We lust.

We lie. We grasp. We take that which is not ours. And then where does the journey take us? It began with evil desires. It continues as it would take us to evil thoughts and to evil actions, to sin. And then it takes us as we have already noted. It takes us to death.

[17 : 49] The inevitable and just outcome of our sin. For the wages of sin is death. This is the journey that begins with breaking this commandment. This is the journey that begins when we covet.

This is the journey that begins when evil desires take us on our way to sin and to death. What about you? Is this the journey that you are on? Is this the road that you are traveling?

Is this the destination that awaits you? Eternal and irreversible separation from God. And all that is good for all that is good comes from God.

That is the first journey that begins with the breaking of this commandment. But there is another journey. There is another journey that begins with the breaking of this commandment. And it is a journey to Christ. It is a journey to Christ. And you say to me, but how can a journey to Christ begin with breaking a commandment? How can a journey to Christ begin in such an inauspicious way? By breaking His law, by breaking the tenth commandment? You would have thought that breaking the commandment would distance us from Christ.

Well, let's return to a verse that we noted a few moments ago in Romans chapter 7 and verse 7. And listen to what Paul has to say on this matter. In Romans chapter 7, and we'll read verses 7 and 8.

[19 : 23] Romans chapter 7, verses 7 and 8. What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not. 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. For apart from law, sin is dead. Now, there is a great deal that Paul packs into these two verses. But here we limit ourselves to what is useful for our immediate purpose, which is this description of the second journey that we are beginning, the second journey that begins with covetousness. What is it that Paul says in this regard in these verses? Well, Paul was a law keeper.

In his pre-conversion days, known as Saul, he was a law keeper. He zealously and sincerely sought to keep all the commandments. We're considering the tenth commandment. Well, Paul, in a very genuine and in a decided and in an intense way, sought to keep all the commandments.

And as regards outward observance, he was largely successful. That was certainly his own honest conclusion. You can see what he says for himself in Philippians chapter 3, verses 4 to 6. And we won't read them now. Time does not allow. But there, Paul describes his own honest conclusion. He said, well, as regards outward observance of the law, I was faultless. I kept all the commandments.

That was his conclusion. But there was one commandment, one commandment that was not subject to outward observance. Notice that Paul in Philippians, we haven't read the passage, but there he speaks of outward observance. But the problem with the tenth commandment is that it's not about outward observance. It is a sin of the heart. And so this one commandment, and Paul states it very explicitly here in Romans chapter 7, this one commandment stubbornly and persistently pointed its accusing finger at Paul. He said, ah, but you're guilty of this one. Oh, you don't lie. You don't commit adultery. You don't steal. You don't murder. But what about your heart, young man? What about your heart? You covet. You have evil desires, or don't you? And even such an arch hypocrite like Paul had to say, well, yes, my heart, my heart, my heart is indeed evil. There are evil desires in my heart and I cannot evade the pointing finger of this commandment.

The power of this commandment, you shall not covet, lies in its ability to pierce the heart of a man and of a woman. But how does it take us on a journey to Christ?

[22 : 38] The breaking of the commandment, the breaking of the commandment leads us to the first stop on this second journey. You see, it showed Paul and it shows us that we are sinful, sinful to our very core.

Our heart is not in the right place, contrary to what we are often told. We have, we all have a serious heart condition. Our heart is a breeding ground for evil desires of every kind. And this recognition that is a breeding ground for evil desires of every kind of sin is a breeding ground for evil desires of the commandment. This recognition, accompanied by the work of the Spirit of God, produces in the sinner conviction of sin.

A recognition of his condition, of his sinful condition. It enables us to appreciate that the problem of sin is ingrained and serious and incapable of a quick fix on our part. You can't fix your heart. You can't control your evil desires. You can't do it. It's beyond your capacity. And this commandment helpfully identifies that for you. And as the Spirit of God would take the commandment to open your eyes, to see your condition, it leads you on the way on this journey to Christ, to this first necessary stop, a recognition that you are a sinner and that your problem is a problem of the heart. But of course, we can't remain at this stop on our journey. We must go further. And the commandment takes us further. The commandment takes us to Christ himself. Listen to what Paul again says on this occasion as he writes to the church in Galatia.

In Galatians chapter 3 in verse 4, sorry, in verse 24, listen to what Paul says. Galatians chapter 3 in verse 24, so the law, the entirety of the law, but very particularly the Ten Commandments and this commandment, the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ. Do you notice the language? The law was put there to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. What Paul is saying is that this breaking of the commandment, this recognition that he is a sinner, this recognition that he can't solve his heart problem, serves to take him to Christ. Take him to the one who has fulfilled the law.

Take him to the one who is able to forgive his law. Breaking the law and particularly in the case of Paul, the tenth commandment, the tenth commandment, very particularly leads him to Christ. You see, the law condemns him. The law is used of God to convict him, but the law also points him in the direction of Jesus Christ. It points him in the direction of the one who is able and willing to forgive his law-breaking. The law points him in the direction of the Savior.

[26 : 06] And so, the breaking of this commandment leads one on a very different journey, on a journey to Jesus Christ himself. But even meeting Christ on this journey, in recognition of our need of him, even that is not the end of the journey. Remember what we were saying near the beginning.

The problem is a heart problem. The problem that is addressed by this commandment, you shall not covet, is a heart problem. A corrupt and dissatisfied heart. Now, what does God do with our heart as we would embrace Jesus Christ? What God does is that he renews and cleanses and, and this is very crucial, he satisfies our heart. He satisfies our heart. That is what God does. He satisfies our heart. He replaces the unworthy, evil desires of a corrupt heart with the worthy desires of a renewed heart.

He grants us a new and intense desire. He grants us as a gift a new epithumia. And it is a desire, an epithumia for Jesus himself. He comes in and he throws out all the garbage, all the stuff that would lead us to death. He says, there's no room for this anymore in this heart.

There is room in this heart for one desire alone, for Jesus Christ. Again, remember the language of Paul in Philippians. He desired to depart and be with Christ. Christ was his intense desire. Christ satisfies his soul. Christ is the one he worthily covets above all others and all else. And this desire for Christ is then reflected in the life of the believer, reflected and confirmed in a desire for Christ's word. More to be desired than gold, yea, much fine gold, was the experience of the psalmist. A desire to worship him, a desire for fellowship with his people, a desire to serve him and make known his precious name. These desires, these epithumias, remove the evil, unworthy, garbage desires that had previously reigned supreme in our hearts. As this desire for Christ is cultivated and deepened, the other stuff loses its glitter and appeal. This is what Thomas Chalmers, one of the founding fathers of the Free Church of Scotland, described as the expulsive power of a new affection. The expulsive power of a new affection. You see, what used to captivate us no longer captivates because Christ has come in its place. And a desire for Christ and contentment in Christ is the only effective antidote to covetousness is the only way. Now, this is not an overnight transformation.

The work of God in the heart of a redeemed man is a work in progress and a work in which we must cooperate. Contentment with Christ and his providence for our lives is something we must learn. Listen again to Paul, again as he addresses the Christians in Philippi, I have learned, notice the language, I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation. Paul had to learn that secret. Yes, God comes and does this heart work in us, but then we together with him and aided by his spirit must learn learn this secret of being content, content with and in Jesus Christ and in all that he would lay out for us in our lives. Two journeys both begin at the same point of departure, breaking this commandment. You shall not covet. We are all at the point of departure, for the commandment applies to us all and we are all guilty of breaking it. All of us have the opportunity to go in one or other direction. My friend, what are you going to do? What are you going to do with this familiar command? You shall not covet. It can and it will take us, it will take you in one of two directions, to one of two destinations. You can't simply stand at the beginning of the race and remain static.

[31 : 25] You must go on one or other of these journeys. You will arrive at one or other of these destinations. Will it be death and eternal separation from God or will it be life and contentment in Christ?

Where is your breaking of this commandment taking you? Where are you going? Just for a moment, pause and ask yourself that question. Where are you going? Where are you going?

If you are on the road to death this morning, what must you do? Well, I have good news for you. I have good news for you because on that road to death there is a fork in the road and on that fork, Christ himself this morning is stretching out his hand and inviting you and saying, come with me.

Come with me. Get off that road to death. Come with me. I can deal with your corrupt heart. I can forgive your covetous heart. Come with me. Will you evade his glance this morning? Will you pass by on the other side?

Will you put your foot on the accelerator on the road to death? Will you allow your covetous heart to lead you mercilessly like a lamb to the slaughter? Will you do that this morning?

[32 : 57] Rather, I plead with you. If you honestly recognize that you are on the road to death, then this morning, embrace the Savior, embrace Jesus Christ who is ready and willing to forgive you and to cleanse you, to grant you a new heart, a new desire. His arms are outstretched for you this very morning.

But I have a word also for you, Christian friend. By grace and by grace alone, you are on the other road. You have been convicted of your covetous heart and that conviction has led you to Jesus Christ. But if you are honest with yourself, you must and you do recognize that sinful, evil desires remain a reality in your experience. You still covet that which you ought not to covet.

What must you do? Well, the road that you are embarked on is a road with no U-turns. The road to contentment in Christ. There's no way, thank God, for you to turn around and abandon the road. There's no even hard shoulder for you to stop and ponder what you will do. What you must do is press forward into a deeper and richer relationship with Jesus Christ. As your epithumia, as your desire for Him grows and intensifies in that measure, all else will perhaps gradually but surely lose its shallow and superficial appeal. That is what you must do. In the words of the hymn, turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.

What road are you on? To what destination will you finally arrive? Let us pray.