

# THOU SHALL NOT COVET! Part 10

*Scripture Reading: Exodus 20:17. 17“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 belongs to your neighbor.”*

**Introduction:** The Ten Commandments are great framework for our daily living. It is a law and order for our personal life as well as for our community. First 4 Commandments direct us to love God, and the other 6 laws emphasize to love others. Thou shall not covet is an interesting Law. This particular Law deals with sin that is committed within our heart. Most of the other sins are based upon our actions, but this one is committed internally within our heart, and then later carried out in action.

*According to Webster’s dictionary, Covet means: “to feel inordinate desire for what belongs to another” (Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 11 ed.*

*Is coveting an action or feeling? This is a huge topic. Great for discussion. So mull over it while I am talking. Your interpretation of this particular law heavily depends upon your conclusion. Jewish rabbis are divided over this topic. Rabbi Levi Ben Gershon summarizes his opinion this way:*

*The meaning of ‘covet’ is to attempt to attain something from one’s neighbor, for example, to offer him money to divorce his wife so that he can marry her, or to sell him his slave or his ox or his ass . . . This is a very evil characteristic, to attempt to take away one’s neighbor’s possessions. We know that coveting is not just in one’s heart, but that it entails some action from what is said in the Torah ‘You shall not covet . . . . Hence, we infer that one does not violate the prohibition if one does not actually do something in order to obtain the coveted object” (Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, France 1288–1344). Maimonides too sees coveting as an action (see Sefer HaMitzvot, Prohibitions 265, 266).*

According to Talmudic sources, a person is not considered to have violated the prohibition against coveting simply by having such thoughts, nor even by expressing such feelings outwardly in words, but only by accompanying the words with actions.

Some conclude that coveting is charged when the ownership title changes, such as real estate or moveable property, or even wife by divorce. So based on this, “one violates the prohibition of coveting specifically when all the terms of sale are present.

But the question is, if the seller is persuaded to sell, why is coveting in and of itself forbidden? A valid question!

The strong argument for covetousness by action is through the Ten Commandments itself. The first nine commandments are broken through either action or speech, so why not this tenth commandment also?

Also when we look at the stories from Old Testament, they all point to judgement based upon their actions!

Covetousness was committed by Eve first.

*Gen. 3:4-6. Serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die! 5"For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.*

Eve coveted after the tree of knowledge of good and evil because of three reasons:

It was good for food, it was a delight to the eyes, and the tree was desirable to make one wise

The author of First John mentions those three reasons in his own language!

*1 John 2:15-17 15do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. 17The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.*

Here it is mentioned as lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life!

Eve and Adam were judged because of their actions. They were charged when they ate the fruit and not before that.

Story of David and Bathsheba is a story of not only adultery and murder, but it is a full blown story of covetousness! (2 Samuel 11).

It was spring time and the kings go to war at that time. David did not feel like going for war. He wanted to sit at home and enjoy life while his soldiers had to fight and lay down their life for the king. Idle mind is devil's work shop.

One day, the king went up in the evening. The timing may have been deliberate! That's the time all women return home from the field and take shower. David's eyes fell on another man's wife. The covetousness through lust took place in his heart. He did not exercise self-control. He had to have her. The Lord intervened and exposed his sin through Bathsheba's pregnancy. Yet David tried to cover up by making her husband to visit Bathsheba and sleep with her. But he refused. So David had to get rid of him. He decided to kill him and take his wife permanently. Bathsheba also played a part in this cover up. She could have confessed to her husband what David did to her. But she did not. She just kept quiet. She became partner of crime also. But God exposed David's wickedness through His prophet, Nathan! Here the covetousness was judged based upon David's action. Had David just coveted over Bathsheba but did not follow up, the story would have ended differently!

Ahab story was also very similar. He coveted Naboth's vineyard. He tried to purchase through money first. But Naboth refused because the land belonged to family inheritance. It was supposed to stay within the family. Ahab was very hurt! His wife Jezebel could not look at the sad face of her husband. She had the same attitude like the gangsters. "We'll ask, if you don't give it we'll kill you and take it! She did kill him through false trial and took Naboth's land. Again God interfered and exposed Ahab's wickedness through His prophet! In this story, Ahab and Jezebel were judged by their actions! Had Jezebel not interfered, Ahab would have remained sad, but he would not have sinned overtly and he would not have received the swift judgement!

So we can see through all these stories that they were judged through their covetous actions, and not through their covetous feelings in the Old Testament.

But in the New Testament, we are expected to guard our heart first so that there will not be any trace of covetousness! We should control not only our actions and speech, but our thoughts also?

Jesus says, anger itself stems out of murderous heart, we must guard against such explosions. If we lust in our heart, we commit adultery in our heart. We must guard our eyes and heart against that. If we extrapolate these arguments, then coveting in our heart is sin also! How can we guard against such thoughts? The TV uses full of those images to invoke adultery, and covetousness of materialism! Jesus admonishes us to fight against it. He tells us take drastic step to guard against such thoughts. "If your eyes causes you to stumble, pluck it out!" He also knows that we cannot conquer through our own strength, but through the presence of Holy Spirit, we should be able to fight it out!

Paul wrote a whole chapter in Romans to deal with this dilemma.

*Romans 7:7,8 7 what shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "YOU SHALL NOT COVET." 8But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead.*

Paul argues that the Law brings the knowledge of sin. If there was not law that says, thou shall not covet, we will not have that sin at all. Also, the more we try to implement that law, the more we fall down. We cannot attain this perfection through our own strength. We need the help of the Holy Spirit! We can be saved only through the shed blood of Jesus Christ and His sanctifying Holy Spirit!

But the Jews who believe, covetousness is a heart disease, think that they can control it with their own strength.

A student of Rabbi complained about it and asked his teacher. How can we stop those covetous thoughts in our hearts? The teacher told him that he needs to learn this lesson from one of his students who lived in the coldest part of Russia. After many weeks of traveling in the cold winter time, the student arrived. He found the house of student rabbi in the night time. He knocked on the door for a while but this host would not open the door at all. He was actually sitting only few feet away from the door, yet he would not move. The cold was becoming unbearable. The guest kept on pounding! He could not go anywhere else. Finally the host opened the door. He showed great hospitality! He gave him warm drink, and good food. The traveler stayed there for many days. He needed that much time to recuperate. Finally the traveler opened up to ask his questions.

When he had finished, the host said: "Tell me, my friend, is a man any less a master of his own self than he is of his home?"

"You see, I gave you my answer on the very night you arrived. In my home, I am the boss. Whomever I wish to admit — I allow in; whomever I do not wish to admit — I do not."

The guest got his answer. He has the power to stop those thoughts?

But Paul says that we cannot get rid of it with our own strength. We need the Spirit of the Lord!

Covetousness is actually seeking something that belongs to another person (according to Exodus 20:17. (Coveting neighbor's house, fields, wife, male servants, and maids).

Thou shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor!

We fall into the temptation of comparing ourselves with our neighbors and friends and then we start coveting.

Covetousness starts with inferiority complex!

Covetousness is idolatry. Paul says that. In Colossians 3:5, he says, "Therefore, consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, Evil desire, and greed, covetousness." And then he says this - "which is idolatry." Now, that's strange. Covetousness is idolatry? Why do we call it an idolatry? God said you shall have no other God before me. We put our selfish craving before Him.

James gives us a clear picture of conception of sin:

*James 1:14,15. 14But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. 15Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Covetousness is full blown sin ready to be born. Catch it before you start lusting and craving for it.*

*James 4:1-3. 1What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? 2You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. 3You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.*

Siddhartha Buddha, the founder of Buddhism summarizes this way: Desire is the cause of destruction. Leading a desireless life leads to serene life. But you can achieve it only through the Spirit of Grace - the Holy Spirit, and not with your own works. Also, there are some good desires we can covet after. I'll address it last.

Joseph never coveted for his boss' wife. Had he coveted for her before, he would have have fallen for her when she pulled him. His heart was so pure, he actually could run away from her.

Do not covet after what is not yours. Be content! Contentment is exactly opposite to covetousness. The true richest people in the world are the ones who are very much contented with what they have. Mr. Joseph Edward was like that in our midst.

Conclusion: Commandment: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." If we can obey that law of love, we can obey this tenth commandment! That kind of love gives us more pleasure to see those who are dear to us prosperous and successful!

Covetousness leads to poverty. Social workers today will painfully testify that family breakdowns are often a result of financial difficulties and the stress that these put on marriages. Many of those stresses are self-imposed. Their clients confessed that they didn't really need the new kitchen or the new car, but once their friends were moving up in the status stakes, they felt under pressure to maintain their social standing.

Covetousness can lead to criminal activity.  
(David, Ahab)

One Rabbi summarizes aptly. "Before you cast your eye on specific property of your neighbor, you first see the overall picture of your neighbor's life.

Most of us tend to assume that the grass is greener on the other side. But we don't always consider the full picture, the whole package. So, he's got a great business and a very healthy balance sheet. But is *he* healthy? Is his family healthy? His wife looks great at his side when they're out together, but is she such a pleasure to live with at home? And if he should have health and wealth, does he have good children to take care of him in his old age? Is there anybody who has it all?"

We may get away with our wickedness in the society. But God is watching! God will intervene if man does not! Those culprits will be judged by God, if not in this life, in their life beyond death!  
Eg. David, Ahab examples.

We can use this law, "You shall not covet" as a fence or boundary keeping us at a safe distance from the very serious sins that may result from it and that may cause very serious harm to others: theft, adultery, and – most serious of all – even murder.

If we really love our neighbors as ourselves, we will indeed rejoice over his success, his big house, his well-manicured lawn, his favorite sports car, his beautiful boat, his beautiful wife and children!

Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep!

The way to keep covetousness far away from us is through our contented life style!

First Corinthians, 12:31. "Covet the gifts," Paul says. "Desire the gifts of the Holy Spirit." We ought to be coveting those spiritual gifts. David coveted to be in the courts of the temple!

*Psalm 84*

*2 "My soul longed and even yearned for the courts of the LORD; My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.*

*4,5 How blessed are those who dwell in Your house! They are ever praising You. 5. How blessed is the man whose strength is in You, In whose heart are the highways to Zion!*

*10. For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand outside. I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness."*

Discussion topics!

1. Covetousness. Action or feelings?
2. If the neighbor is persuaded, and the neighbor agrees to sell, is that covetousness?
3. Can we stop those covetous thoughts before it takes over?

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