

The Ten Commandments: Part IX & X ***Thou Shall Not Covet: Are you a giver... or a getter?***

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Finally, at week number 9 we come to the last of the commandments, or actually as we Lutherans number them, the last TWO commandments, those about coveting. *Don't covet your neighbor's HOUSE and don't covet your neighbor's WIFE or your neighbor's STUFF.* Period. It's simple, on the surface.....we are supposed to be content with what we have and be happy for our friends and neighbors about what THEY have....EVEN if they have more stuff or better stuff or nicer stuff or prettier stuff or sexier stuff or different stuff or greener stuff. It's THEIR STUFF....so we help them keep it as THEIR stuff and they, in turn, are supposed to help US keep OUR own God-given stuff.

It's a rather "boring" commandment, wouldn't you agree? As I quipped last week, who looks forward to an fun-filled evening of *coveting* someone else's STUFF, especially when we all have so MUCH stuff to begin with?

In these 2 commandments, God gets to the very heart and core of what we are really made of and puts a perfect "bookend" on His rules for successful living. In the first commandment we are to '*have no other gods*' and in the last commandment we are warned '*not to let goods become our gods.*'

There's an interesting balance that has to be maintained here. After all, God has given us STUFF! Remember what He did for Adam and Eve.... God FILLED the Garden of Eden with wonderful stuff: all the plants and all the animals, everything they could want! They were supposed to take CARE of it all, name the animals, ride the elephants, pick the fruit, enjoy the veggies.....whatever they wanted, *WITH ONE EXCEPTION....* ."*Don't eat the fruit of that ONE tree, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Leave it alone and all will be well!*"

How'd that work out for Eve...and for Adam? In the world's first use of the phrase "*the grass is greener on the other side,*" they just HAD to have the one thing that wasn't already theirs....and what looked SO good turned out to taste terrible.

We DO live in a very material world, a world filled with STUFF and a world that develops and markets more stuff to us every single day. There are people staying up nights just thinking of more ways to convince us that we can't LIVE without what THEY have to

offer. And yes, it's true: God made us able to recognize and appreciate beauty and to use our creativity to make fine and wonderful things.....and even gives us the ability to make money to HAVE some of this stuff.

Let's take a quick look at a very familiar Bible story and see if we can recognize where the "coveting alarm" should go off. 2 Samuel 11: *In the spring, at the time when Kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the army...but David stayed in Jerusalem (I guess he had "king stuff" to do, but so far, so good.)*

One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. (Insomnia isn't fun, but it's not a sin.) From the roof he saw a woman bathing. (Warmer, but....) The woman was very beautiful. (OK, David's eyes worked and he had an appreciation for the finer things in life, but something "else" begins to come alive within David.) David sent someone to find out about her. (Danger, Will Robinson, Danger!) The man said, 'Isn't this Bathsheba, the WIFE (Major red flag David, she's MARRIED!) of Uriah?' And David sent messengers to get her....and she came and he slept with her." (Did we just hear the 6th commandment shatter, as well as the 10th, and ultimately the 5th?)

In this story it's not hard to recognize where the lines were crossed. There were plenty of red flags that should have....and most likely DID go off within David, but he ignored them, and so looking turned to wishing and wishing to desire and desire to full-blown adultery, and then murder! There are more commandments broken in this one chapter of God's holy word by one of God's chosen leaders than in several evenings of made-for-TV movies! When it's said and done, David, a broken man, takes his place at the throne of grace, receives God's forgiveness and emerges a wiser and stronger person.

It's FINE to admire something for beauty or value or performance, that's not the issue. It's when our own personal values get "out of whack" and STUFF takes control of our lives and....the core issue....robs us of our ability to be CONTENT.

The word "covet" is a *neutral* word. It means to 'desire' or to 'delight in.' It's perfectly good, for instance, to *covet* the prayers of someone else..... and I certainly do "covet" your prayers for me, for my family, and for my ministry. I "covet" your presence in worship and in Bible class. I "covet" your friendship and your willingness to serve the Lord with your gifts and your offerings.

But it doesn't take much to make the whole thing go south. Put 2 or 3 pastors in a room and here's what you start to hear. *"How many people does YOUR church seat? MY church has 738 members AND we're starting a building program!"* Any alarms ringing? And it's not long the seeds of "DIS-CONTENT" get sown *either BY us or INSIDE of us.*

Friends, I believe NO society in history has faced the degree of material temptation that we face today. We are BOMBARDED by people who spend billions of dollars a year to CONVINCEN us that we cannot be happy without what they have to sell us, all with one simple goal: to overpower our ability to say "no."

You know how it works: *I guarantee you will look better, act better, smell better, live longer, jump higher, swim farther, score higher on your SATs, make more money, and your hair won't fall out if only you buy what I have to sell: no money down, no payments until 2013, no interest forever, what's in YOUR wallet, this offer is only good for the next 7 minutes, you're credit is already approved and YOU DESERVE IT!*

Who can resist? And so we sign on the dotted line....take our newest widget home, where we have to find a place for it, dust it, insure it, worry about it, show it off to our friends so THEY have to have one too, and wonder why, when the buzz wears off..... we feel so empty and so it's off to the mall or to eBay or QVC and the cycle continues.

It all reflects the condition of our hearts. Are we, at our very core, GIVERS or are we GETTERS? Do we recognize what God has given us with gratitude and contentment or do we simply respond with an insatiable desire for more?

Genesis 4 gives us an example in the first two sons of Adam and Eve. Cain was a farmer and Abel was a rancher. Somehow, the details aren't filled in, God had made it clear that HE expected them to bring an offering to Him. And so they did. Abel brought the fattest of his firstborn lambs with joy in his heart and Cain grudgingly grabbed a few leftovers. Who was the giver and who was the getter? God accepted Abel's offering because of the condition of Abel's heart, but Cain? He was jealous of his brother, he wanted to keep his stuff, and he coveted Abel's relationship with God.....and the coveting turned to anger and the anger turned to deceit and the deceit turned to murder.

We live in a world that is FILLED with wealth.....it's overwhelming how MUCH STUFF there is. Here's the struggle we Christians face: is wealth for GETTING or is wealth for

GIVING? Are we simply supposed to ignore “Stuff”? Are we called to lives of Christian asceticism.....living in caves with no possessions?

The apostle Paul provides the answer. He was well educated. He had all the benefits of an expensive education and social prestige, certainly someone we would regard as being one of his society’s “elite.” There were times when he had it made. He also spent time chained up in prison and being beaten. And through it all, up or down, hard or easy, Paul had learned the ability to be CONTENT.

That doesn’t mean he DELIGHTED in hardships, people who do that are masochists. But Paul KNEW, to the core of His being, that Christ Jesus loved him, had forgiven him, and had called him be His own! Paul knew that Jesus had GIVEN everything so that his sins could and would be forgiven. Thus Paul also poured himself out for everyone around him, so that they too would know what Christ had GIVEN them.

One more comment about “getters.” “Getters” focus on themselves. Their “cups” always seem half-empty. In today’s culture, it doesn’t take long before ‘getters’ can end up with piles of stuff.....which in and of itself isn’t bad..... and then, here’s the problem, with huge desires for MORE stuff and far too often, with piles of debt.....debt that comes from living far beyond their God-given means. And as the debt builds up, their desire and their ability to GIVE is gone.

God forbids coveting and stealing for one simple reason: they are activities that arise from the materialistic philosophy that *wealth is for getting*. On the other hand, tithing and generous giving are grace-generated activities that declare to God and the world around us that the purpose of wealth is for GIVING.

God doesn’t NEED our money and He doesn’t NEED our stuff.....after all, it all belongs to Him in the first place. What God truly desires is that we will be like Him.....sacrificial in nature. God has promised to supply us with our “daily bread.” That’s why He forbids us from coveting and stealing and simply asks that we trust Him.....one day at a time..... for all that we need for this body and life.

The call for each of us is to pay attention to the condition of our hearts, to realize that we belong to Christ, and to walk in love with Him and in service to those around us....and to that the people of God say “AMEN.”