

Coveting (Exodus 20:17)

I Many people think of coveting in terms of material desires. (As with other commandments, if we think only of the exact words, without considering all of the implications of the verse in terms of other scriptures, then we risk missing the point with God. The fact remains that none of us is as holy as God is, and the Ten Commandments reveal to us just how true that is. God gave us the Commandments to show us what absolutely perfect holiness means to Him. If we think of the Law as if it were a list of rules, then it would follow that life is a kind of game and Heaven is our prize for winning the game. That was how the Apostle Paul thought before he was converted, and he was wrong. No, the Law is more like a summary of God's expectations of us than an exhaustive list of rules to follow, and if we interpret the Commandments in light of other scriptures then we see just how far short we fall.)

A Let us think of what is required of us, as well as what is forbidden to us. (That which is forbidden includes "*anything that is your neighbor's*". Do you suppose that God intended to permit us to covet things that do *not* belong to our neighbor? Our neighbor is likely to be tempted to covet things he does not possess just like we are. The fact that he does not possess them does not excuse us for coveting them. Things that are listed in this Commandment stand as examples of things we must not covet, but as that final phrase indicates, the list we see in the 10th Commandment is certainly not exhaustive. Now let us evaluate our situation from God's point of view. He blessed us with five senses so that we could perceive and enjoy the physical, material world, and He blessed us with enough intelligence that we (e.g., humanity as a whole) could study the principles of natural and physical science and use technology to manipulate our environment. Lost as we are in the depravity of sin, we have misused and abused our environment, and have created a world in which some people enjoy life a lot more than others do. The part

of us that wants to make things better is also corrupted by the depravity of human nature, to the point that God-given desires for safety and comfort have become compulsions to control the people and things around us, in the pursuit of what might otherwise be only ordinary desires. So coveting what we do not possess becomes a motive for the words and actions which we think will get us a little closer to where we want to be, namely, in control of everything around us. The extent to which we do not control something is also the scope of our covetousness. Have you noticed where this has got us? We have arrived at a discussion of how to manipulate our environment so that we feel safe and comfortable in the material world. We have left out all mention of reconciliation with God, and living peaceably with all men, and of seeking God's Kingdom and His Righteousness. Perhaps we think that God should expect such a result, after leaving us marooned in this secular and materialistic environment, where almost everyone we meet is determined to do to us all the things God forbids us to do to them. We think that we are willing to give God His due after we secure control of our future. That is the procrastination with which the humanist forestalls moral accountability; and stands in stark contrast against the holiness God demands as His non-negotiable prerequisite to enter Heaven.)

B How many other commandments are violated, to satisfy desires? (We have shown how the desires most people pursue do not include satisfying God's demand that we be absolutely as holy as God Himself is. That is what is required by all the Ten Commandments. Our pursuit of our own desires serves to gratify the needs of our human spirits for love, acceptance, respect, and appreciation; but that pursuit does not serve the Glory of God, which is our redemption from sin and separation from worldliness, by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit as He conforms us to the image of Christ. We must make up our minds about whom we shall serve, because in the end, we are unable to satisfy both our human spirits and the Holy Spirit of God. If we are tempted to ask, as the Disciples did, *then who can be*

saved? the answer is the same now as it was then: *With men it is impossible, but with God all things are possible.* God can save us from sin, if we believe in Jesus.)

II This is the Commandment the Apostle Paul could not obey perfectly. (Let us read this in his own words, in Romans 7:7-14. Paul knew no sin until the Law said *Thou shalt not covet.* He said, *without the Law sin was dead, but when the Commandment came, sin revived, and I died.* He meant that the life he lived by keeping the Commandments made him spiritually alive, but with the wrong (the humanistic) spirit. He was only alive insofar as he obeyed the Commandments, and he failed to obey the Tenth (*sin took occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and slew me.*) The deception was that the concupiscence he thought was “life” was really sin, but sin was pretending to be religious duty. When Paul realized that sin was really sin, he also realized that he was dead in sin because he had failed to keep the entire law (*the commandment, which was ordained unto life, I found to be unto death.*) How could we describe our own depravity any differently? We all come to the same conclusion: that none of us can establish his righteousness by completely obeying all of the Law of God, which is the only way that one might save himself from condemnation under the Original Sin. Our only hope is that God impute Christ’s righteousness to us. He is the only one Who obeyed the whole Law perfectly.)

A Even the smallest inclinations contrary to God’s Commands must never arise in our hearts. (This is the part where the things parents teach their children are very important. We cringe when we think that *all have sinned and come short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23); but if we evaluate our own attitudes and behaviors honestly we realize that it is true, in our own case, anyway. But what of the small children, who have not yet lived long enough to know which behaviors are good or bad? To the baby, it is *normal* to cry when he is hungry or when he needs a clean diaper. We are tempted to ask how the child committed sin by being born. The answer is that the baby was born in sin just like it was born in Korea or anywhere

else. Sin is his spiritual heritage, just as a certain language and kind of food are his cultural heritage. The soul of that baby is just as dead as any other human soul is until it is born again, and it must be revived by faith in Jesus, just like everyone else's souls. (This was the original reason for infant baptism.) But even that innocent child is not as innocent as our sensibilities make us want to believe. As soon as that child rebels against his parents' authority, he has violated the Fifth Commandment, whether he knew he was rebelling or not. Moms and dads have a very important responsibility just then, and too many parents do not discharge it very well.

As adults, we are remarkably childlike with regard to our respect for authority. We have a tendency to think and act according to the dictates of our selfish egos, and to rebel against any authority that presumes to delimit our attitudes or actions. If we learn how to rebel successfully we also learn to commit a variety of other sins against God and others, in pursuit of gratification; if we can't rebel successfully we certainly can become bitter, and resent the constraints. In both cases, pride goads the unbeliever on into deeper depravity, until we finally become aware that sin is sin, that there is an eternal penalty for sin, and that we need to be saved from sin. By then, vanity has entrenched itself deeply in motive, and obstructs repentance at every point. But what if an obedient child becomes an obedient teenager and later a model citizen, without ever hurting anyone else and doing only good for everyone? Then he will still bump squarely into the Tenth Commandment, if he ever reflects on his life and wishes, even for a moment, that anything had been different than it was. In the unlikely event that one lived an entire life in sinless perfection, the slightest regret that someone else had succeeded where he had failed, or that he missed some pleasure that someone else enjoyed, is still covetousness.)

B We ought to hate all sin in all forms, and at all times. (God will not tolerate any sin in any form from any person at any time. God would not be holy if He did. So we who claim to be children of God must learn to be like our Heavenly Father,

and have the same thought about sin as God has, even if— and especially if— it is our own sin. To pretend that one sin is not as bad as another, or that God will one person's sin but not another's, is a lie from the devil, no matter whose tongue is speaking it. Then to pretend that noble motives justify bad behavior, or that we are O.K. as long as we don't get caught, serves only to reinforce vanity and arrogance, and thus encourages even bolder challenges to the sovereignty of God. Of course these words describe the attitudes and conduct of unbelievers and not any of us; children of God will be humble enough to repent and forsake sin and plead for forgiveness in the Grace of God, and not (in the words of Hebrews 10:29) “do despite to the spirit of grace”, will we not? So, are we?)

C We must delight in all righteousness at all times. (We meet a spiritual kind of dilemma here. God created us with the emotional capacities for love, acceptance, respect, and appreciation; and then He forbade us to seek after the things that would gratify our emotional needs. He gave us the intellectual capacity for awareness of our surroundings and for contriving clever ways to manipulate them, and then told us not even to think about wanting what someone else has— like a better house, or a stronger wife, or a smarter ox or a prettier donkey. So, what should we suppose that God *wants* us to think about? How can we be anything but automatons and still find favor in the eyes of the Lord? Jesus gave us a clue, in Matthew 6:33. He said, *seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.* For the moment, let us assume that the things He promised to add unto us are the things we need to be happy and healthy in life. That leaves us to ponder the conditions for adding them to us: that we seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. It is a very desolate place to be left, especially if we have no righteousness of our own, or any clues as to where or how to find God's Kingdom.

The resolution of this dilemma, as of all others, lies in the all-sufficient grace of God, revealed to us in the life and work of Jesus. Righteousness is the imitation

of the behavior of Jesus; we find the Kingdom of God to be a condition, rather than a location or a time: Romans 14:17 tells us *For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost*. Spiritual peace comes from reconciliation with God. We find peace with God only in the sacrificial atonement for sin by the death of Christ on the Cross. *Joy in the holy ghost* is an interesting way to characterize the Kingdom of God. We ought not to pretend to be happy, and try to make ourselves appear to be happy, just so everyone else will think that we have the Holy Ghost. We don't need to follow the charismatic model either, by which some people think that praying in tongues will invoke the Holy Spirit like some magical incantation invokes the magic of a carnival trick. If it did then our words would be sorcery instead of prayer. The Holy Ghost is God Himself. He is the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. He does several things in the life of a believer. First, He teaches us what faith is, and how to receive Jesus as our Savior by faith. Then He starts changing us, and keeps on changing us until we are perfect duplicates of Jesus. (And it is important to note that all of us are to be replicas of just one model, Who is Christ; not copies of copies, of copies of copies, which, like copies made on a Xerox machine, lose a little more precision with each repetition of the process. To use Biblical terminology, *But as many as received him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name* (John 1:12). We are to be children of God, not grandchildren.) Now there are some ways by which the Holy Ghost in one of us recognizes and identifies with the Holy Ghost in others of us. We may call them *the fruits of the spirit* or we may call them *the righteousness of God revealed from faith unto faith* or by any of several other Biblical allusions, but the point is that the presence of the Holy Ghost in the life of a believer proves that he or she is a believer. That presence of the Holy Ghost will be self-evident to all other believers. We will not have to prove to anyone who has the Holy Ghost that we have the Holy Ghost too. There will be a resonance in our lives

that provides that proof altogether without human agency. So, the joy that is in the Holy Ghost is a unique characteristic of the Kingdom of God; it is not something we can pretend to have, or conjure, or even share with someone who does not have it, like we might share our cookies at recess time. We who do have Him share in the Kingdom of God, and we know that we do. We know because the life of Jesus lives in us, and we live in Him. The Tenth Commandment tells us not to desire some things; the New Testament tells us what to desire instead. We please God by giving Him the only thing that is truly ours to give, which is our volition. Children of God make a conscious decision to give all our love and moral allegiance to Him.)

III Complete obedience in all points proves to be impossible in this life. (As we sit in church meetings, listening to sermons like this, we find it easy to say *Yes, that is what I want to do; God give me the grace to do it faithfully.* But then after church, we notice that our spirituality is affected by things like, *the coffee is too weak, or the rain makes my knuckles hurt or now what knucklehead parked his car in a place that blocks mine?* Or we might notice that our Christian charity wears a little thin in heavy traffic, or during hot weather, or around noisy children. Later, perhaps we will remember that Jesus was never frustrated, or impatient, or unkind to anyone, and we feel like kicking ourselves because *we* were; so we repent again, and hope that God will be patient with us at least one more time. Now just in case I'm talking about anyone besides myself, let us recall as well that we suspect Jesus would have thought and acted differently than we did *because* the Holy Ghost is teaching us to be more like Him; and the fact that we understand our need to repent is evidence that the Holy Ghost is a good teacher and that we are finally getting the lessons right. We will not reach absolute perfection in this life. The best of us will get only some of it right, some of the time. We will see the model to which we must conform, and we will see how far we have to go before we are as holy as God is; but we will get started at the conformity, every time we try again to do better than we did before.)

A The sincerity of our resolution needs to be converted too. (For most people, will-power is made of a rather *irresolute* kind of resolution. That is, our wills seem to be easily influenced by clever people, who manipulate our psychology with some threat of unpleasantness or some promise of happiness, if we just follow their ideas. So we agree with them, and perhaps adjust our behaviors or attitudes to meet their expectations, until some bigger threat or brighter promise distracts our concentration or diverts our moral allegiance. The child who is worried about being punished for not finishing her homework will likely be very sorry; not that she was irresponsible, but that someone intends to hold her accountable. That child is likely to know many people who know how to make her sorry; those who wield that kind of power must also learn how to make her repent. *Godly sorrow worketh repentance.* That is why we say that *what* parents teach their children is very important at that point. We must bring that child to an irrevocable decision never to exhibit their bad attitude or bad behavior again. The parent who says, *Don't let me catch you doing that again* has taught the wrong lesson. The implication is that if Dad caught me in the same bad behavior again then the punishment would be even worse next time around; but Dad needs to teach the child not to repeat the behavior again at all, and whether Dad catches him or not is quite irrelevant. When an instructed adult is sorry for his sins with *godly* sorrow, then repentance means that he recognize sin to be sin and hates it with the same fervor as God does, and even more if that were possible, because it is his own sin. Then his resolution to change is sincere, even if the root of sin still remains to molest him from time to time. Yet believers trust our Heavenly Father to remove even the root of sin, which is our human nature, once and for, by His Grace. We will certainly have to step out of this life and into the next life to find complete freedom from all temptations; but we must also use the remainder of our time in this world to become as much like Jesus as we can possibly become.)

B We have only small beginnings of obedience, during this life. (As we mature

in Christ, we notice that we are different than we used to be. Others will notice the difference too. We come to enjoy the time we spend in the presence of God and other believers in church; we learn to hate former sins we committed; we notice a marked impatience with people who only make excuses for not repenting; and we learn to be honest with ourselves and one another, and especially with God, about our spiritual condition. We start helping one another to become better Christians, and the Holy Spirit helps us, too, as we read the Bible and pray.)

C Sin is the transgression of the Law: *some* obedience is never sufficient. (Only the most irresponsible believer stops at repentance and regeneration, and waits for the Holy Spirit to finish the work of Grace in his life. A little bit of obedience is not enough. It is like an inoculation against growing *in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (II Peter 3:18). Let us keep this thought in the front of our minds always: there is no place in Heaven for any sin at all. If we continue to feed our humanistic spirits with worldliness and to make excuses for sins we would rather not repent and forsake, then our humanistic spirit might even choke off the new life in Christ that is growing in our soul, and as in the parable of the sower and his seeds, the Word of God has no fruit in that life. The *difference* between the ability to grow in grace and the inability to convert completely to a true and pure faith in Christ is our *volition*: what, exactly, do we *want* to do, in this life? If we have a sincere desire to make Heaven our home for eternity then we will take every opportunity to prepare ourselves for that outcome; if we look around at the things of this world that we must leave behind, and regret their loss, *He that puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the Kingdom* —Luke 9:62.)

IV All 10 Commandments should be strictly preached. (As we have noted, the 10 Commandments contrast the holiness of God against the unrighteousness of men. They are only grievous to unbelievers; preaching them is only tedious to those who want to try to establish their own righteousness without availing themselves of the

Grace of God; for to do so requires repentance, and true repentance requires godly sorrow, and godly sorrow only comes when we realize how utterly depraved our souls are and how utterly helpless we are in our natural, human condition. So we preach the 10 Commandments, without exception and without dilution, and we pray for the Grace of God to help us perform the things required of us by them.)

A By them, we learn how sinful our nature is. (Only after we truly understand what idolatry is can we repent all the ways we place our trust in things that are not God; and only after we understand what *Love thy neighbor as thyself* really means can we truly obey Commandments 6, 7, 8, and 9. As we reflect on the attitudes and behaviors that characterized our unredeemed human natures, we see just how much human pride interfered with our obedience to God. Ego and pride pointed out many alternatives to holiness, and we pursued as if they were real options, and as if we were free to choose any of them that would gratify our material or emotional or psychological needs. Only later, after it was too late, we realized that the pursuit of gratification violated the Tenth Commandment prohibition of covetousness. Such a realization only comes after the Law of God teaches us how holy God truly is.)

B We learn to pray for more grace from God, that we may conform better to the image of Christ. (In Psalm 40, King David wrote, *I waited patiently for the LORD; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings.* There is no remedy for spiritual death outside the Grace of God. We may, if we choose, waste a lot of time and energy substituting social activism for Christian responsibility; but in the end we will be no holier in the eyes of God than we were at the beginning, and in fact some secular activities might be nothing more than different forms of *ungodliness*, deceiving us by pretending to be religious duties. By that we mean that the victims of human trafficking, *and* the young people who make placards and join demonstrations for the elimination of it, all need the Grace

of God to save them from their sins just as much after the demonstrations as before them, and only faith in Jesus produces salvation through the Grace of God. Now the preaching of the 10 Commandments can make that message plain to them all; but the social gospel of the contemporary church only impedes the work of the Holy Ghost, working as He does in and through the words of the Scriptures. So let true believers evaluate our *social responsibilities* by the Ten Commandments, too.)

C The constant reminding (about the 10 Commandments) elicits two very different responses from true believers, and from everyone else. (Even among people who claim to be children of God, there is a tendency to think that repentance was a once-and-for-all-confession that one was born as a sinner but that he wants to change into a saint so that he can go to Heaven when he dies. So he proceeds to demonstrate his conversion by joining a church, paying tithes, reciting the Apostle's Creed, receiving baptism, and eating the Lord's Supper. He is likely to hear the 10 Commandments, at least once, and then to think, *Well, now, here is something that I really ought to change in my life.* Except for being baptized (we do that only once), he thinks that he is growing in Grace each time he repeats the rituals. Perhaps he is; that is not ours to judge. We shall, however, point out that if he never forsakes the sin he claims to have repented, or if he simply confesses and forsakes one sin in order to divert attention from another one, then he is not much different from the man who never repented sin in the first place; neither of them was truly born again. Now let us consider James 1:21-24— *Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls. But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was.* The other, godly response to the 10 Commandments, is to *behold our face in the mirror* of absolutely

perfect righteousness, recognize our imperfections, and pray for the Grace of God to save us from our sins. That person, the doer, found and finds Grace with God.)

V Believers must have different desires from those of unbelievers. (We seek first the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness; and we find them, in the Grace of God. Unbelievers and worldly church members, seek for gifts from God (even calling them by their Bible name: *gifts of the spirit*) but never seek, or ever find, the Gift-Giver. They are pretenders only, who deceive themselves and other pretenders, by the foolishness that passes for religion in the contemporary church. They covet, for popularity, positions, possessions, and for influence over other people who are equally deceived by their egos, about what is or is not good in God's eyes. This kind of church member is no different from any other unbeliever, who has not the slightest interest in repenting and forsaking sin or converting to faith in Jesus.)

A Humanism serves egoistic pride; believers serve the Glory of God. (Human pride rebels against the moral authority of God. It never admits to being simple vanity; and it often disguises arrogance with altruism, which may even appear to be humble; but it is a false humility. True humility will confess the depravity of human nature and the utter corruption by sin of everything that is human, or human-made. The humanistic spirit survives, even thrives, by force-feeding the dead carcass of the human soul with worldly amusements and entertainments, and then gorging itself on the bloated carcass, like some diabolical carrion eater. Unbelievers flatter themselves and congratulate their entertainers by telling one another how uplifting and inspiring their amusements are.

But believers are born again by the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit puts the life of Jesus Himself into the dead carcass of the human soul, and the believer becomes a child of God. God is not distracted by pretensions of worldliness, and neither are true believers. We recognize the problem of human pride, and we stop feeding it with worldliness. Instead, we feed our new, born-again Christian spirit with the

Bread of Life, which is the Word of God, and give it the Water of Life (Who is Jesus!) to drink. The humanistic spirit never quite goes away completely, it keeps coming back, tempting us with yet more or different varieties of sin, so that by our backsliding, it doesn't starve to death; but believers learn to deny access to our soul by that spirit. We must live in and by the Spirit of God. The Glory of God is that the Holy Spirit makes that happen in our lives! Each time we examine our lives by the Law of God and find another flaw, the Holy Spirit helps us conform a little more closely to the image of Christ, for which God predestined us all, and amen!)

B Worldliness gratifies human desire; godliness gratifies believers. (Human ego seeks *for* the gratification of worldly lusts. The humanistic spirit in us demands that we feed it with philosophy, education, arts, and entertainments. These things are the elements of worldliness that make our human spirit feel good about being a human spirit. For this reason, we illustrate the problem by describing the consumption of a dead carcass by a carrion eater. Humanity is dead in trespasses and sins; we died when our first ancestors committed the Original Sin. To pretend that circumstances are different is futile self-deception. Only the Spirit of God can make our human souls live again: as Jesus said, *I am come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly* (John 10:10). Believers are born again, with new life from God. Our souls live with the eternal life of Jesus. We are new creations, and the characteristics of our new creation in Christ are very different from those of the old creation, which died in us so that Christ could live in us. Our desires are different; we no longer seek to gratify our human spirits, but to gratify the Spirit of God Who lives in us instead. What, then, gratifies the Holy Spirit? Holiness, of course, which is our emulation of the character of our Heavenly Father; and righteousness, which is our imitation of the behavior of Jesus. The 10 Commandments describe for us both how holy God is and how unlike Him we are; and the things we embrace instead of holiness are the ways we violate the prohibition of covetousness. Let us use God's

Law as He intended then, as the *schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith* (Galatians 3:24). Christian faith is not that our efforts at being good will satisfy God, but rather that God imputes to us the righteousness of Christ, Who is the only One ever to have obeyed the Law perfectly. In the end, if we look up to Christ, we see His eternal Kingdom; but if we look around at the worldliness we must leave behind, we inevitably and invariably violate the 10th Commandment.