

**Sermon preached by Mr. Michael Bittenbender
at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 26, 2019**

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS (10)

Exodus 20:1-2, 17

When I mentioned to a dear friend, who shall remain nameless, that I was preaching today, their response was, “What is it this week, the 13th commandment?” Perhaps you may feel the same way but I assure you it is the 10th and final commandment, and there will be no 11th, 12th or 13th “Mike’s additional commandments” series.

This morning’s scripture passage should come as no surprise to you. It is Exodus, chapter 20, as has been the case for the previous commandments. We will start with verses 1-2 and then move down to 17. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy word.

“And God spoke all these words: ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery...You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.’”

May God bless the reading of His holy word.

This was the last and final command that God gave the Israelites before sending Moses back down Mount Sinai only to discover the Israelites had already made their own idol to worship. This command deals with the object of our hearts’ desires. The word “covet,” according to dictionary.com means “to desire wrongfully, inordinately, or without due regard for the rights of others.” It is important to point out that the definition attaches the rights of others. This would imply that coveting involves another person. So with that observation, in light of this commandment, we can take heart that God is not condemning desires, or wanting something. What God is prohibiting is this strong desire for something that doesn’t belong to me. Robert Morris says, “God is saying you shall not desire what belongs to someone else.” It is good to want to better yourself. It is good to have desires and ambitions. It is good to want to be successful. But what God doesn’t want is for us to be looking at everything someone else has, and not being content. Not being ok with where God has us.

We have a couple of Old Testament examples of people strongly desiring what someone else has. Most notably, I’m sure you recall, is David and Bathsheba. David sees Bathsheba from the rooftop bathing and thinks “I must have.” He figures out a way to get her and also dispose of her husband. These actions regarding Bathsheba have long-lasting consequences for David and his family. Achan, in Joshua chapter 7 is covetous when he sees some of the devoted things and takes them for himself. The Israelites suffered great losses because of this. Achan is brought before Joshua and Achan confesses what he has done and is taken out and stoned. Joseph’s brothers are envious and covet the affection and love Joseph has from their father and they throw him in a pit and sell him off to slavers.

One notable example of a strong desiring for something belonging to another that had long-lasting consequences that we may not always think of when we hear the word “covet,” is in the beginning of Genesis, in the Garden. The Hebrew word for coveting is *chamad* (*Ha-Mad*). *Chamad* is used in both givings of the law in Exodus and Deuteronomy. It is also used to describe Eve desiring the forbidden fruit. Genesis 3:6 says, “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.” Satan used what did not belong to Eve, and then Adam, against them. He put what they did not have, the knowledge of good and evil, and said this will not kill you. This will make you like God. And they ate it.

All throughout the Old Testament we see coveting being a problem. God knew from the beginning this was going to be an issue and in the Law added it as something His people should avoid. Each time a person covets, there are long-lasting consequences. God knows that coveting leads to a burdensome, deceitful, and destructive life. All of these instances recorded in the Bible, and these are just a few of them, show that the individual who commits the sin of coveting is not content with their life.

The Bible calls us to a content life. A content life leads itself to be free from coveting. Hebrews 13:5 says, “Keep your lives from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’” While this passage warns us against coveting by telling us to be content with what we have, it also establishes a connection between contentment and God’s faithfulness. As if to not be content challenges God’s faithfulness in our lives. Kevin DeYoung puts it this way: “When we covet, we don’t believe God is big enough to help us or good enough to care. Our discontentment is an expression of how much more we think God owes us.” When we look longingly after what someone else has, whether that is their spouse, job and income, car, house, family, etc., and think “I want what they have,” we question God’s faithfulness and goodness to us.

As I have mentioned in the past, the Ten Commandments are broken into two sections. The first 4 relate to our relationship with God and the last 6, including this one we are talking about, relate to our relationships with others. Jesus, in giving us the two greatest commandments, mimics this breakdown of how we can love God and love others. When we covet, we are not loving our neighbors. When we covet, we also are showing discontent with what God has provided for us and can then lead to a discontentment with God, preventing us from loving Him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. As Robert Morris put it, it causes us to resent God, thinking that God is providing something for that person that He isn’t for me.

The Bible is not saying it’s not okay to have desires, or even notice what other people have. Remember coveting invokes someone else, so we can have desires for being successful as long as it is not because of or rooted in it belonging to someone else. We can notice what other people have, but we have to be careful. DeYoung also said this about noticing what others have: “There’s nothing necessarily wrong with noticing what other people have, but most of us don’t stop and notice so that we can give thanks to God for His blessings to others.

We notice and then stop being thankful for all that God has given us.” Discontentment has this mentality of, if only I had this, then I would be happy. If only this would happen, then I would be happy. It often prevents us from living in the here and now. It has us longing for something else, often what someone else has.

Rev. Graham Smith, in his sermon on this commandment, perhaps some of you may remember this sermon from back in 1990, challenged everyone to learn to live with contentment. He challenged them to do this by doing two things: First, be grateful and enjoy what you have. He mentions a quote from a Greek history book that mentions Socrates and says: “Often when Socrates looked at the multitude of wares exposed for sale, he would say to himself, ‘How many things I can do without!’” I chuckled at this and then was humbled quite quickly and quite severely. See, I am a member of one of the greatest stores the world has ever seen, a store where you can get 36 rolls of toilette paper for less than \$15, where they only sell things in “lifetime quantity,” for instance, their massive container of mayonnaise, if only mayonnaise lasted a lifetime. If you haven’t caught on yet, I’m referring to Costco. I walk into Costco thinking one day I’ll be able to afford all of this. That’s a stark contrast to what Socrates would have thought walking into Costco. I quickly began to realize I am a person who had been looking at things as if things could make me happy.

The second thing Rev. Smith mentions for everyone to learn to live with contentment is, don’t compare yourself to others. Ask anyone aged 13-25 with an Instagram account and ask them how often they are inundated with posts about how awesome an adventure their friend just had, or the latest designer clothing they just purchased. The answer will be startling. The comparison game is strong on social media. The platform is designed to show off your best life to the world, when the reality may be very different than what is portrayed. What once was used to keep connected with people throughout the world now wreaks havoc on the mental health of the consumer. Sorry, getting down from my soap box, and by soap box I mean a cultural trend I unfortunately fall prey to as well.

If we live our lives comparing it to everyone around us, when we consume media about everything our friends or anyone is doing, we will play the comparison game. What we feed into our minds and our lives will come out of our minds and lives as well. I feel like I have heard something similar in the Bible about that! The comparison game, looking at the things other people have, and wondering why I don’t have that also, leads to discontentment.

We place a value to our lives based upon our material possessions. Luke 12:15 says, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” Our value, what our life consists of, is not based on our possessions. Our possessions, the material things of this world are temporary. We don’t take with us after death all our things. Jesus warns us not to store up our treasures here on earth where moth and rust destroy, but to store up our treasures in heaven. These things on earth won’t last and won’t matter in heaven. Our value is based on the price that was paid for us. Ron Mehl says, “Our value is wrapped up in the amazing fact that Jesus Christ, the mighty Son of God and Creator of the world, loved us enough to die for us. He is the One who gives worth and value to our lives. He paid the price and purchased our salvation.”

What is it you love? What is it that you long for, that thing that you tell yourself that if only I had blank, or if only blank would happen I'd be happy? What is in your life that perhaps leaves you discontented? DeYoung says, "If the answer is anything other than God, you're an idolator." As I close out this series I want to give you one last quote from Kevin DeYoung, and then remind us how these Ten Commandments show us the love of God. The quote is this: "There's a reason that 'do not covet' is the last of the Ten Commandments. It comes at the end because it is such a fitting summary of everything that has come before. It's impossible to covet and love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. It can seem strange that the 'Ten Commandments' start with such lofty ideals, I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me... and then ends with a prosaic whimper, 'stop looking at that donkey.' But do you see how the two are connected? God is saying, 'I'm the only God you need. Don't turn to Baal. Don't turn to statues. And don't turn to animals or friends or abilities either. Let nothing else capture your gaze and affections ahead of me!'"

Lastly, let us not forget why these commandments are given. As I have mentioned before, these commandments are given after the exodus from Egypt. God brings the Israelites out of the land of slavery, and now is establishing both a moral and civil law for His people but also the means to have a deeper relationship with Him and others. God did not tell His people that He will bring them out of slavery only if they obey each of these commandments perfectly. He is not saying, "Hey, get your life straight and then come have a relationship with Me." Rather, "I brought you out of that terrible place, love me and this is how." That is how He is today. He doesn't tell us to get our life together before we can follow Him and have a relationship with Him. He says, "I will bring you out of your slavery, out of whatever sin it is. I will give you that freedom in Christ and now come have a relationship with me and this is how."