

## **Coveting: A Victimless Sin?**

The scripture lesson for today has two parts. First we will be reading from the ten commandments, numbers six through ten, and then later from the words of Jesus, from the Sermon on the Mount, from Matthew. The first four Commandments have to do with our relationship to God: You shall have no other gods before me, reject idolatry, do not misuse the Name of God, and keep the Sabbath. The other six have to do with our relationships to each other.

### **Exodus 20:12-17:**

**12 “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God gives you.**

**13 “You shall not kill.**

**14 “You shall not commit adultery.**

**15. You shall not steal.**

**16. “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.**

**17. “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor’s.” (RSV)**

May God bless the hearing of his holy word.

I’d like to focus today on the last of these Commandments, number ten. “Thou shalt not covet ...” There’s an interesting difference between this one and the preceding five. Consider “You shall not kill.” Or, as the more modern NRSV puts it, “You shall not murder.” The inclusion of this commandment makes sense. Murder is obviously wrong. Doing so is an overt act of the worst kind, that infringes not just on someone else’s property and freedom, but his very life. The following commandments against adultery, theft, and bearing false witness are similar. These are things that directly harm others. But the last commandment is different. “You shalt not covet ...”

This is different, because one could covet something without any outward sign. It’s within a person. If the Ten Commandments were to be used as the basis of a legal system to rule a society, how could this one be enforced? How can we know if someone is “coveting”? That leads us to the question, “How can it be a crime, to just think about something?” In the language of today, is “coveting” a “Victimless crime?”

The term “Victimless crime” has been used to call into question the legitimacy of laws against behavior that doesn’t seem to directly harm another person. The term is often used to argue that drug abuse is “victimless.” It is said that the drug user is only harming himself. It’s also used to argue against treating prostitution or related things as criminal. The proposition is that these are just transactions between willing participants – there is no victim. Once upon a time, some forms of gambling were illegal, because of the harm they might bring to those tempted into gambling. But this, too, was seen as a victimless crime. Now, gambling is legally restricted, not to protect people, but to protect the state’s income from taxing the profits from gambling.

In the political discussions of our time, legitimizing various forms of drug use is one of the agenda items on the table. Currently, the use of marijuana has been made legal in many places, often under the supposed restriction to medical use. The Federal government seems to have relaxed enforcement. We can expect, assuming this trend continues, widespread legalization of marijuana, and eventually other drugs, under this idea that it is victimless. The logic is that the drug user's harm to himself is a matter of personal freedom. It is said that making drug use illegal criminalizes persons, who are really doing nothing that directly harms others. The argument is also made, that making drugs legal would eliminate the crime that afflicts our society, that revolves around illegal drugs. If drug use was legal, governments would be able to tax it, as they do tobacco and alcohol. The argument, as for gambling, is that the additional money in state coffers would be used for the public good. Similarly, other behavior once deemed unacceptable is being portrayed today as victimless and acceptable.

So, it is interesting to find in the Bible, indeed, in the very Ten Commandments, what seems to be a prohibition against a "victimless crime." Let's take a closer look. I re-read the Tenth Commandment:

**17. "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's."**

What does it mean, "to covet"? The dictionary says, "to desire inordinately, or without due regard for the rights of others; desire wrongfully." Or, "to wish for, especially eagerly."

It seems there are two possibilities. One is to wish to have something that your neighbor has, and the only way to get it is to take it from your neighbor. "Your neighbor's wife" is a unique individual. In our day, we understand that, "Your neighbor's husband," is meant as well. The individual coveted is singular. There is just one of them. I suppose you could ask your neighbor, "Does your wife have a twin sister?" Or then, "Any sister?" But that likely will not satisfy. The only way to attain what is coveted, is to commit one of the sins that are not victimless: kill, steal, or perhaps harm your neighbor with false testimony, to gain what is sought.

There does seem to be another possibility. You see your neighbor's house, or car, and think, "I sure would like to have a car like that!" In Moses's day, cars hadn't been invented, so you'd covet his ox, or ass, (we'd say donkey these days), instead. I recall when Cindy and I lived in Blacksburg, Virginia, when I was in graduate school. A neighbor in the apartments had a baby blue Cadillac convertible with white trim and interior. It was a beautiful car. And big! Bigger than what they call luxury cars today. Something well over 6000 lb. I admired it. Maybe you could even say I coveted it.

But, here's the critical issue: If I had the money, General Motors would have been happy to sell me one of my own. I wouldn't have to take it from my neighbor. We could both have one. Now, I did understand, even then in my younger days, how impractical such a car would be, compared to my 15 year old Rambler. Eventually, I did buy my own big car, a '73 Chrysler

Imperial. I just had to have that big lime green car with the white leather interior. It was so big, that when I would turn the key, they didn't necessarily answer from down in the engine room. That car was trouble from the get-go. After moving here in October, 25 years ago, I had to repeatedly pour water into the radiator whenever I took a trip. Several jugs full. I carried about eight jugs of water behind the driver's seat. I'd refill them whenever I could. With winter coming and water frozen, I wouldn't be able to do that. So I finally consigned the car to its fate at the junkyard. I was properly punished for desiring that big car!

So, is there anything wrong with this second form of "covetousness"? Our modern economy seems to be built on it. The media exists to convey images calculated to make us covet things that the sponsoring companies are eager to sell. It's like being a kid in a toy store. You see that action figure, or doll, or toy truck. "Mommy, I want that!" How much of a tantrum do you have to pull to force Mommy into forking over the cash to shut you up? Kids can get pretty skilled at working those strings. Just another ordinary transaction in our consumer economy.

Indeed, when there isn't enough of borrowing and spending going on, we read of concern by the pundits who write for the Business pages of the newspaper. I have to say, I'm a participant in all this too. I collect toy trains. You may have seen some of them at Christmas. I have done the eBay bit. On eBay you can find any toy you ever wished for, or had and lost, when you were a child. I now have more toy trains than I can put on the track at one time. But that doesn't stop me from wanting more. And my library of books overflows. Is anything wrong with all this? As Christians, we can ask ourselves, "What would Jesus say?"

So we now turn to the words of Jesus, our second scripture reading. These passages are all from the Sermon on the Mount in found in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapters 5 and 6. I'll be skipping around a bit. First, I read from Chapter 5: 21.

**Matthew 5: 21 "You have heard that it was said, to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; ...."**

Jesus is saying that not only is murder wrong, the anger that can lead to murder is also wrong, and "liable to judgment." Legalists might say that such anger or hatred itself, without being acted upon, is "victimless." Proscription against it is unenforceable. We too often see anger and hatred being condoned, and even encouraged, in our world today. But Jesus is speaking of what is wrong before God, and the judgment he speaks of is not the legal system administered by a king or high priest, but before God. Jesus is, in effect, saying that the way we think about things does matter. Such hatred is wrong, whether acted on or not. Jesus comments similarly on adultery. What does he have to say about covetousness? There isn't a similar passage that is quite so direct, but I believe these words from Chapter 6 lead us to the answer:

**Matthew 6: 19 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."**

Covetousness is a desire for objects, generally desirable material goods. Your neighbor's wife or husband doesn't quite fit that description. But at its worst, lust for someone turns that person, in the mind of the transgressor, into an object of desire. It's dehumanizing. Acting upon a covetousness for things clearly can lead to the other sins. But Jesus, instead of commenting on the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment directly, addresses our relationship to the material world more generally.

Jesus says, **“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on Earth, ...”** The material things of our neighbor that we see and covet, the house, the ox, the donkey: they would remain our treasures, if we had them, only here on earth. Our modern material society can add a lot more things to that list. But the fact remains, as the old adage has it, “You can't take it with you.” That's true, whether we gain our treasure by stealing it from our neighbor or committing some other crime to get it, or whether we acquire our coveted treasure through hard work and honest purchase. Jesus advises us instead to lay up treasures in Heaven. For where our treasure is, there will our heart be also. What kinds of treasure is that? Not material treasures, certainly. Rather, things we do for each other: kindnesses, encouragement, help in times of need; the things of good relationship with our neighbor.

Jesus is attacking the root issues of the sins of materialism: the uncontrolled desire for more than we need, the desire for what our neighbor has, and the desire to be so self-sufficient and materially secure that we do not need God or our neighbor.

I'd like to draw your attention to the next two verses that follow:

**22 “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; 23 but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!”**

These verses seem out of place; what does the health of one's eye have to do with our treasures? We modern folks tend to think of the eye as just another organ of the body. When we think of an eye not being “sound”, we think to ourselves, Oh oh, glaucoma, or a cataract, or detached retina, or macular degeneration.

But, I believe Jesus is referring instead to what we use our eyes to see. We can use our eyes to look at what our neighbor has: his house, his wife, his ox, or his donkey, and covet it. We think about things we look at. And we may find our minds moving in directions of darkness: things that, acted upon, are harmful or sinful. The modern computer age makes this worse. Have you been browsing through the news on the computer, and seen images and a few words dangled in front of you, something apparently scandalous or juicy, just to get you to click on it? There are specialists in the art of temptation, who deliberately construct these things, hoping to lead you to where they want you to go. It is not intended to be for your benefit. Those clicks, those paths into the darkness, are not anonymous. The masters of the web are collecting data on every click that you make.

Instead, Jesus asks us to use our eyes as instruments of light. Look for the good. See your neighbor and his wife as part of your family, united under God, as brothers and sisters in Christ, or as neighbors in the brotherhood of mankind.

As to our material needs, Jesus continues later with:

**31 “So, do not worry, saying ‘What shall we eat? Or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the pagans run after all these things, but your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.**

If we can be satisfied with sufficiency, our eyes are free to receive the light of God’s goodness and mercy. But not only that. We ourselves can then become a light to others. Jesus says to his disciples earlier, in Mathew 5:

**14, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. 15 Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”**

In light of Jesus’s words, let me try to rephrase the 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment. This is how I understand it:

“Do not use your eyes to look upon your neighbor’s property to covet, for that fills you with darkness, and leads you into temptation. Instead, keep your eyes upon the things of God, so that you are filled with the light of God’s love, and become a beacon of God’s light to others.”

Paul, who is a bit more Greek in outlook, and perhaps closer to our modern Western perspective, writes these words in his letter to the Philippians:

**Philippians 4: 8 Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there be any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.**

The 10<sup>th</sup> commandment is no longer a victimless transgression. In covetousness, we not only fill ourselves with darkness, but we can no longer serve as a light to others. In covetousness, we cast a shadow that harms our neighbor, rather than a light which helps our neighbor. We really can’t have it both ways. If we are not going to live a life that is a blessing to others, what are we then? It is better to keep our eyes upon Jesus, and be children of the light, in a world that desperately needs more light and less darkness.

Now, I can’t tell you how all our country’s social problems can be resolved. It’s a complicated mess. But understood from Jesus’s perspective, these evils that are being loosed on us, and indeed are already among us, are not victimless. They suck the light not only from the willing victim, who is trapped into addiction or another sin, but also from their family and friends, from whom they steal and feed, and the world at large as well. A potential light to the world is lost, and becomes a parasite, lurking in the darkness, instead.

Each of us, as individuals, can do our best to keep our eyes on the light of God's mercy and love, and act accordingly. If we do so, the temptations of darkness, and the covetousness of the materialist world, will have a hard time gaining purchase on us. And your light may illuminate a path to freedom for someone suffering from those burdens.

Amen.