

Thou Shalt Not Covet

Exodus 20:17-18

[Phil Johnson](#)

This morning we have finally reached the last of our series on the Ten Commandments. You'll find the Tenth Commandment in Exodus 20:17. And I'm going to read verse 18 as well, because it sets the tone for all ten commandments and helps us understand the gravity of God's Laws. Exodus 20:17-18:

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 is your neighbor's."

18 Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off.

Now, if you grew up in a Catholic environment, you were taught the Ten Commandments a little differently. I mentioned this once before, but it's worth reviewing. In the Catholic catechisms, the Second Commandment is omitted from the count. That's the commandment found in verses 4-5, where it says, "**You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything . . . You shall not bow down to them or serve them.**" Obviously, it wouldn't do to have

such a clear commandment against bowing down to images in the Roman Catholic system, so the Catholic church brushes past that commandment and renumbers them all. And then when they get to verse 17, they make two commandments out of the tenth. So that in the Catholic catechism, the Ninth Commandment is "**Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife**"; and the Tenth Commandment is, "**Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods.**"

Notice that in order to number the Ten Commandments the way the Roman Catholic system demands, they have to change the order of the words of Scripture. Because in the text of our verse, "**You shall not covet your neighbor's house**" comes before "**you shall not covet your neighbor's wife.**" But the Catholic Church says "**Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife**" is the Ninth Commandment, and "**Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods**" is the Tenth.

Why do they renumber the Commandments that way? They *have* to do that, in order to get rid of the Second Commandment. We know there are precisely Ten Commandments, because Scripture refers to them as the "**Ten Commandments**" in Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13; and Deuteronomy 10:4. There aren't nine and there aren't eleven. So after deleting the second commandment, in order to get the number back to ten, the Catholic Church had to break the commandment against coveting into two separate

commandments. It is the easiest of the remaining eight to divide that way.

But notice that in Romans 7:7, the apostle Paul refers to the commandment against coveting as a single commandment. He writes: "**If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'**"

So Exodus 20:17 is quite clearly meant to be one commandment, and the commandment in verses 4-5 against graven images is the Second Commandment. That is the natural way to read this passage, and it is the plain sense of what Moses wrote. The Roman Catholic catechisms are deliberately trying to obscure the truth of the Second Commandment.

But it is the Tenth Commandment that we are looking at this morning. And this one is unique among all the commandments, because it deals with a sin that takes place *only* in the heart. It goes to the root cause of our sinful actions, and it forbids even the first appearance of sinful desires.

Here is the proof, in the Ten Commandments themselves, that the law of God commands our hearts, not just our external behavior. Someone might try to argue that the sins forbidden in the other commandments all are visible *deeds*—that which is observable in the person's behavior. But the Tenth Commandment deals with the inward man

only—the thoughts of the heart—that which is invisible to others. So it finally becomes undeniably clear in this commandment that what is forbidden in the law of God are not only willful, obvious actions and outward deeds of evil, but also the very first motions and inclinations of the heart toward sin. This is a commandment that expressly forbids *evil thoughts*.

If you have found yourself convicted in our study of the other commandments, this one will really get to you. When you come to a true understanding of what this commandment means and how easily it is transgressed, you will be startled and appalled at how regularly you are guilty of breaking the law of God.

Of all the commandments, there is probably none against which we sin more frequently or more carelessly than the Tenth Commandment. No other commandment so clearly reveals how helpless we are to obey the law of God perfectly. Our own fleshly hearts are the seed-bed in which evil thoughts germinate. And this commandment teaches clearly that the thoughts themselves are evil. It is not merely whatever evil deeds they produce that qualify as sin. This commandment expressly condemns our evil desires, and not one of us can pretend to escape its condemnation.

Perhaps it was for that very reason that the apostle Paul focused on this commandment in his discussion of sin in Romans 7. Paul himself—even as a mature

apostle—confessed that try as he might, he could not quell the covetous thoughts that arose from his heart. In fact, he said this in Romans 7:7-8: **"I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness."** The remnants of flesh are so strong in us that this commandment against coveting only makes us covet that much more badly.

Is the law itself evil, then? Paul asks and answers that question in Romans 7. The law itself is not evil. It merely shows us what sin is. And (verse 8) **"sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness."** The fault is in me, not in the law. Verse 12: **"the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good."** And (verse 14) **"the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin."** The fault lies in me. The law simply reveals my sin for what it is. And because I am so sinful, I respond to the law by disobeying it rather than obeying it, so that the law against coveting actually stirs up more covetousness than ever in my heart and mind.

The problem is in us, not in the law. And that is why it is so important to see that the law governs even the inward man—not just external actions. If you miss that point, you have missed the main point in this whole series on the Ten Commandments. The law was given to govern our hearts. Miss that point, and you'll be like the Rich Young Ruler,

who insisted that he had kept all these laws from his youth, because he had not looked very carefully into the mirror of the law, so he couldn't even see his own sin.

Remember how Jesus answered the Rich Young Ruler? You'll find it in Mark 10:21: **"You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."**

Was Jesus telling that fellow he could earn his way to heaven? Not at all. He was showing him his sin. Since the Rich Young Ruler wasn't convicted by the Ten Commandments alone, and he was looking for something else that would enable him to merit heaven, Jesus gave him something tangible to do that *did* reveal his sin. Verse 22 tells how the Rich Young Ruler responded: **"Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions."**

Now, what does that tell you? First of all, he was guilty of breaking the First Commandment, because his wealth and prestige were more important to him than God was. Second, his whole life was driven by greed, which is a blatant violation of the Tenth Commandment. He wasn't as sinless as he thought. He had just not come to grips with what the Tenth Commandment really demands of us.

Now, we have seen from the beginning that all the Ten Commandments are multi-dimensional. Wherever a positive

duty is commanded, a negative prohibition is also implied. And when a commandment is given in negative terms, such as this one ("**You shall not covet,**") a positive duty is also implied.

What is the *positive* duty required by this commandment? Let me read you what the Westminster shorter catechism says: "*Question 80*: What is required in the tenth commandment?" *Answer*: The tenth commandment requires full contentment with our own condition, with a right and charitable frame of spirit toward our neighbor, and all that is his. Here's the positive side of this commandment from Scripture, Hebrews 13:5: "**Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have.**"

So this commandment means we are to be contented with whatever circumstances divine Providence has given us. I'm of the opinion that you cannot ever be truly content, and therefore you cannot even *begin* to obey this commandment, until you embrace the sovereignty of God and trust Him no matter what happens in your life. The biblical prototype for that kind of contentment is Job, who after losing all his children and possessions in a series of disasters (said in Job 1:21): "**Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.**"

If you don't embrace the sovereignty of God like that and understand that nothing comes to pass apart from His

decretive will, true contentment will be impossible for you. But if you embrace the sovereignty of God and really believe that He is working all things for your good and his glory, then you can begin to see why discontentment, greed, and lust are such horrible sins.

On the negative side of this commandment, that is precisely what this commandment forbids: discontent, greed, lust, every other kind of evil desire.

The Hebrew word for coveting here simply means "desire." And if you do a word study to see how the word is used in Scripture, you will see that it is a morally neutral term. It literally means "desire," and the same word is used for good desires as well as evil desires. There are good desires and there are evil desires. And to state it as simply as possible, an evil desire is a desire for something we are not supposed to have. That is what is forbidden. It doesn't forbid us to desire things in general, but it forbids any desire for that which we cannot lawfully have. Look at the commandment again: "**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 is your neighbor's."**

There is a wholesome and pure type of coveting. In 1 Corinthians 12:31, Paul writes, "**Earnestly desire the higher gifts.**" Or as the King James Version has it: "**Covet earnestly the best gifts.**" There is a kind of covetousness that is not evil.

It's when we covet that which God Himself esteems worthy of our desires. Desire in and of itself is not wrong; but make sure that you only desire for yourself what God desires for you.

In fact, the first usage of this word in Scripture is in Genesis 2:9, which describes the perfection of what God created in Eden: "**Out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight.**" The Hebrew word translated "pleasant to the sight" is the same word translated "covet" in the Tenth Commandment. It speaks of something desirable; something delectable; something to be delighted in. God created the delights of Eden to appeal to perfectly righteous desires in Adam and Eve. Those things they were permitted and even encouraged to covet.

Eve did not *sin* until she coveted the forbidden fruit, that which she could not lawfully have. And Genesis 3:6 uses the Hebrew word for coveting again when it says "**the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes.**" The expression "**a delight to the eyes**" is from the same Hebrew word translated "covet" in Exodus 20. She coveted the forbidden fruit, and that covetousness was the very root and inception of her sin.

Sinful coveting—evil desire—lies at the root of all sin. It is the seed-bed from which virtually all other acts of sin germinate. That's what Paul meant in 1 Timothy 6:10, when he wrote, "**the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils.**" All

the other commandments are therefore closely tied to this sin of coveting. If you desire something else more than you desire what God has given you, you have violated the First Commandment, because you have put whatever you desire in the place of God. The thing you covet becomes an idol to you. If you break the Second Commandment and make a graven image, you have in effect made something desirable and pleasant to the eyes the object of your worship. So *that* violates the Tenth Commandment as well. Covetousness can also cause people to take God's name in vain (when they swear falsely out of covetous motives), or violate the Sabbath (making them work rather than rest because of greed for material things). Covetousness makes people dishonor their parents, kill, and bear false witness, too. And stealing and adultery *always* spring from a sinfully covetous heart.

So all the commandments are linked to this one, and this one in particular targets sin in its embryonic form, showing us once again that it is not merely *deeds* of sin that are sinful, but the very *thought* of sin is exceedingly sinful, too.

I have been thinking about the various dimensions of this commandment these past few weeks, and I realized that this final commandment more than any of the others reveals to us how hopelessly in bondage to sin we are. To put it simply, we cannot perfectly control what we desire. Our desires are a reflection of our nature, and our nature is something we are powerless to change.

This is a lesson I learned in childhood. There were a few foods I did not like and could hardly force myself to eat. For one thing, I hated peas. I can't explain why. I just hated them. And my mother served peas a lot. The other thing I remember hating with a passion was liver. My dad actually *likes* fried beef liver. To his day I despise the stuff, and no amount of willpower can ever force me to like it. It's in my nature to hate it. And when I was a child and my mother served liver and peas, it was a major battle to get me to eat it. She would threaten me with punishments, and force feed me, and eventually after a three-hour battle, she would get me to gag down enough of the vile stuff to enable her to declare victory and send me off to bed for the night. She accused me of being strong-willed, but the truth is that no amount of willpower in the world could ever make me desire what it was my nature to hate. If I had enough willpower to make myself *like* peas and liver, I would have done it, just to avoid the misery of the food wars. But you cannot will yourself to desire something it is your nature to abhor.

That is the same problem every unregenerate person faces. We are born with a love for sin and a hatred for God. Romans 8:7-8: "**For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.**" It's not the nature of fallen flesh to desire what God desires. We *cannot*

be subject to the law of God. Scripture is very clear on that point.

And even after we are regenerated, given new hearts and new, godly desires, enough of the flesh remains in us until we are glorified that those old desires continually assault us, as Paul says in Romans 7. Evil desires and covetousness still spring from the corruption that remains in us. We can overcome them and conquer them to some degree by meditating on the truth and allowing Scripture to renew our minds, but it is a slow and arduous process, and our victory will never be complete until we are fully glorified.

By the way, now that I'm an adult, I don't actually *dislike* peas anymore. My tastes have changed as I have grown. Thanks in part to my mother's efforts, I've also learned to eat things I don't particularly like. I still despise liver, and I still don't prefer peas to other vegetables. So even though my tastes have changed and matured, I still haven't totally overcome and obliterated my adolescent nature.

The same thing is true for us as Christians. We have new hearts and new desires and a new capacity to love what God loves. But we are still plagued by the old habits and old desires, and try as we might, we cannot completely subdue those sinfully covetous thoughts. So it is impossible for us to obey this commandment perfectly.

But the battle we fight against covetousness, even as Christians, is much more serious than the problem of how we

deal with our preferences for certain foods. Because here we are talking about evil desires and sinful habits. And when we understand what the law demands of us, we see that the war against covetousness is not a battle we can win on our own.

And I want to show you this by looking at the dimensions of this law. If you're taking notes, I'll have three points. I want to look at this law from three angles. We'll talk about the height of it, the breadth of it, and the depth of it, in that order. And I'll explain what I mean by that as we go.

1. ITS HEIGHT—THE PERFECTION THE LAW DEMANDS OF ME

First, when I speak about the height of this law, I'm talking about the perfection it demands of me. David said in Psalm 19:7, "**The law of the LORD is perfect.**" That's true in every possible sense. The standard set by the law of God is the standard of absolute perfection. We have seen this in every single commandment we have examined. The standard the law sets is too high and too perfect for any sinful person to attain.

Remember, at the end of Jesus' exposition of the law in the Sermon on the Mount, this was the lesson He drew from it: (Matthew 5:20): "**For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**" And in verse 48, He made the

standard explicit: **"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."**

Now occasionally, I run into someone who wants to argue that Jesus could not really have meant that literally. Because no one but Jesus Himself has ever been that perfect. It sets a standard that is impossible for us to attain. So some people try to redefine the standard. Like the Rich Young Ruler, who defined the standard by his own behavior. Or the Pharisees, who defined the standard by comparing themselves with others. And some people say this doesn't call for *absolute* perfection, but it just means you have to do the best you possibly can.

There are two problems with redefining the standard like that. First, you still aren't going to meet the standard anyway. You're not always going to do the best you can. You are still going to fall short sometimes, whether you make *yourself* the standard or set an artificial standard by comparing yourself with *others*. And second, Jesus could hardly be more explicit. The standard is the perfection of God Himself. And even the Scribes and Pharisees, with all their fastidious observance of the minutia of the law, still couldn't meet the standard. It is an impossible standard for sinners to attain.

So why is the standard set so high? Why are we given a command that is impossible for us to obey? Very simply, because God would compromise his own perfection if he set any *lower* standard. Absolute perfection is the only kind of

righteousness He can bless. Anything short of that is unrighteousness. And even if you could "**keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, [you are] guilty of all.**" Scripture everywhere teaches this, and that is why it is utter folly to imagine that you can please God with your own righteousness. You *cannot* do it, and the Tenth Commandment is a graphic reminder of that.

Consider what this commandment means. It strikes at the root and the first rising of sin in the heart. It means that the moment you feel a desire for something that is not lawfully yours, you have already violated this commandment and therefore you are guilty of all. If you drove into the parking lot this morning and saw someone's new SUV and wished it were yours instead, you coveted that which is not lawfully yours. When you find yourself longing for new furniture or a bigger house just because someone else you know has those things, you are entertaining evil thoughts. The first figment of any thought that makes you dissatisfied or discontent with what God has given you is the very kind of covetous thought forbidden by this commandment. If you dwell on the thought and allow it to germinate into resentment or bitterness, that's worse still, but the fact is that your first covetous thought is itself sin according to this commandment, even if you never allow it to go further.

Now you may be in need of a new car, and if that is the case, by all means go shopping and pick one you like. But if

what prompts your sense of "need" is the mere fact that your neighbor's car is better than yours, or if you find yourself coveting a more expensive car than good stewardship would permit you to purchase, then you have crossed the line into sinful desires, and you have violated the Tenth Commandment.

This may seem a paltry sin to some, but it is exceedingly wicked for several reasons. First, it involves the sins of ingratitude and unthankfulness against God for the blessings He *has* given you.

Second, it is an offense against His sovereign Providence. We ought to trust Him enough to know that all His ways are right, and He is working all things together for our ultimate good, just as He promises. If you think God has slighted you by withholding from you some good thing, then you are thinking the same way Eve was thinking when she first coveted the forbidden fruit. We ought to trust God enough to know that He knows what is good for us, and He will do what is good for us, and **"No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly."** He certainly gives us more and richer blessings than we deserve.

Third, in the same vein, it is disobedient to the many commandments in Scripture that tell us to **"be content with what [we] have"** (Hebrews 13:5). Why are we to be content? The writer of Hebrews goes on to say, **"For he has said, 'I will**

never leave you nor forsake you." If we have the Lord as our portion, how can we possibly think that is not enough? Romans 8:32: **"He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"** If we trust him for that, we shouldn't covet what we don't have.

Fourth, it's worldly to set our desires on the things of the earth. **"But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."** If you want to covet something, covet something that can lawfully and legitimately be yours—something you know God desires for you—like the treasures of heaven. Matthew 6:19-20 says, **"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal."** And if that's where your real treasure is, that is where your heart will be as well.

Fifth, coveting is no small sin because it is the seed from which more heinous sins are germinated. Or to switch metaphors, the person who harbors covetousness is incubating eggs that will hatch into hideous monsters. Sin like this doesn't lie dormant. It quickly develops into lust, greed, bitterness, anger, envy, and all kinds of other evil attitudes. And from there it easily produces deeds like murder, adultery, theft, and more overt acts of sin.

Remember that the whole world of human evil originally sprang from Eve's covetous look at the forbidden fruit. And when you realize what this sin can lead to, you won't be tempted to think of it as a small thing.

Listen to James 4:1-3:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?

Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?

2 You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.

3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

In other words, covetousness gives rise to all kinds of wars and fighting. All the evil in the world is the fruit of wicked thoughts that begin with simple covetousness. And covetousness hinders our prayers, too. James says, *You're too busy coveting to ask God for what you need, and when you do pray, your prayers aren't answered because they are rooted in covetousness, too.* This is no small sin.

And so this Tenth Commandment is a vital one. It underscores the utter perfection of God's law, and it explains why the law demands of us absolute perfection. Because one simple breach of the law, including a single covetous thought, holds the potential for a world of mischief.

That's what we see when we examine this commandment from God's perspective. And this is what I mean when I

speak about the *height* of the law. It raises the standard as high as it can possibly be raised, and demands of us a Godlike perfection.

Now let's look at a different dimension of this commandment:

2. THE BREADTH OF THE LAW—THE CONVICTION THE LAW PLACES ME UNDER

When we examine the breadth of this law, what I notice is the conviction it places me under. No one who is honest with himself can contemplate what this law demands and then declare himself guiltless. I've been meditating on this law for several weeks, since we finished the Ninth Commandment, and so my awareness has been heightened to the many covetous thoughts I entertain daily. If I tried to enumerate them for you, there would be too many to list if we stayed here all morning.

Covetous thoughts spring easily from our sin-ruined hearts, and we live in a society that is intent on capitalizing on the sin of covetousness. You can't even drive away from church without being assaulted with billboards and radio advertisements that are designed to make you covet.

I can easily relate to what the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 7:7-8: **"if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing an**

opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness."

We covet so easily and so regularly that when we're not thinking about God's law, we don't even notice it. And then when this law comes along and tells us not to covet, the sin that dwells in our members responds with even more coveting than ever!

You know what I mean. Some of you weren't even thinking about coveting your neighbor's SUV until I said that a moment ago, but then your heart responds with a stronger desire for that SUV than ever, and your mind starts trying to justify why it's not really such a great evil to entertain a desire like that. And before you know it, you're thinking of all the things you don't have, but if you had them, your sinful heart tells you, *that* would make you really content.

The apostle Paul, writing on this same subject, concludes this part of his epistle by writing in Romans 7:24: "**Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?**" If that is not your response, too—if you don't feel the weight of this commandment—then you haven't really come to grips with the breadth of this law. The plain truth is that it condemns us all. Not one of us is entitled to sit here and pretend we are innocent of the sin of coveting.

In Psalm 119:96, David writes, "**I have seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad.**" No commandment is broader than this one, for it gathers up all

the sinful thoughts that underlie all the sin we commit, and it declares those *thoughts* sinful, too. And so it convicts and condemns us in a most thorough way—judging not merely our visible behavior, but even the secret imaginations of our hearts. And like a crystal-clear mirror held up before our hearts, it reveals that every imagination of the thoughts of our hearts is only evil continually.

It makes you feel a little hopeless, doesn't it? That is precisely the sort of conviction this law is designed to make us feel. It ought to make us cry out, as the apostle Paul did, for someone to *deliver* us.

But wait. There's still more. Let's look at one more dimension here:

3. THE DEPTH OF THE LAW—THE DESTRUCTION THE LAW THREATENS ME WITH

When we contemplate the depth of God's law, what stands out in my mind is the destruction it threatens me with. It's one thing to feel the want of perfection, and to be convicted about our own sinfulness. But we haven't really plumbed the depth of God's law until we understand the utter destruction it threatens us with. If you have turned away from Exodus 20, turn back there, and I want you to pay careful attention to verse 18. This is the atmosphere in which the Ten Commandments were given:

"Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off." Everything about the giving of the law at Sinai was designed to produce fear, and dread, and terror in the people. And that is fitting, because the ultimate message of the law is a message of utter destruction. Ezekiel 18:4: **"The soul who sins shall die."**

When Moses gave the law to the Israelites, Deuteronomy 27 describes how God had him call them all together and pronounce a series of curses on any who disobeyed God's commands. Deuteronomy 27:10:

You shall therefore obey the voice of the LORD your God, keeping his commandments and his statutes, which I command you today."

11 That day Moses charged the people, saying,

12 "When you have crossed over the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin.

13 And these shall stand on Mount Ebal for the curse: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali.

14 And the Levites shall declare to all the men of Israel in a loud voice:

15 "'Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the LORD, a thing made by the

hands of a craftsman, and sets it up in secret.' And all the people shall answer and say, 'Amen.'

16 "'Cursed be anyone who dishonors his father or his mother.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'

17 "'Cursed be anyone who moves his neighbor's landmark.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'

18 "'Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind man on the road.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'

19 "'Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'

20 "'Cursed be anyone who lies with his father's wife, because he has uncovered his father's nakedness.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'

21 "'Cursed be anyone who lies with any kind of animal.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'

22 "'Cursed be anyone who lies with his sister, whether the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'

23 "'Cursed be anyone who lies with his mother-in-law.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'

24 "'Cursed be anyone who strikes down his neighbor in secret.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'

25 "'Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'

26 "Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'

Twelve times the priests pronounced a curse, and twelve times the people said "amen." The message of the law was clear (V. 26): "**Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.**" One chapter later, in Deuteronomy 28:20, the Lord reiterated the curses by saying this: "**The LORD will send on you curses, confusion, and frustration in all that you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me.**"

That was the message of the law, and that is why in Galatians 3:10, the apostle Paul wrote, "**For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.'**" In 2 Corinthians 3:7-10, Paul repeatedly refers to the Old Covenant Law as "the ministry of death" and "the ministry of condemnation." That was the whole point of the law.

So is the law itself evil? Remember, Paul answered that question back in Romans 7:12 "**So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.**"

But doesn't that leave us in a hopeless state of condemnation? No. That's where the gospel comes in. "**The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and**

good," but if all we had was the law, we would be left under the threat of utter destruction.

But Christ came, according to Galatians 4:4, "**when the fullness of time had come . . . born of woman, born under the law.**"

He obeyed the law perfectly on our behalf. In his perfect mind, there was never a covetous thought. Satan tried to tempt Him to covet according to Matthew 4, but Christ remained faithful, and Scripture says he was "**holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners.**" He "**was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.**" He "**committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth.**" He fulfilled the standard of absolute perfection demanded by the law.

And then he took the sins of His people to the cross and paid for them in full. According to second Corinthians 5:21, God "**made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**"

You need a perfect righteousness in order to gain entrance to heaven. You cannot get that righteousness on your own by your own obedience to the law. If you learn nothing else from our study of the Ten Commandments, be sure you learn that much. You cannot do enough to make yourself fit for the kingdom of heaven. The standard set by God's law is much too high.

But *Christ* has obtained that perfect righteousness on behalf of all who trust Him. And the proof of that is the event

we are celebrating this morning: He rose triumphantly from the grave. And this is the good news of the gospel: His righteousness is imputed to all who trust Him by faith as Lord and Savior. **"The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."**

No matter what curse of destruction the law threatens me with, I can point to the One who has already borne the brunt of that curse on my behalf. Galatians 3:13-14: **"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith."**

There are people I know who come to GraceLife every week who have never trusted Christ as Lord and Savior. For you there is no hope. You are still under the curse of the law. The law demands utter perfection from you. It threatens you with utter destruction. And your response to hearing it ought to be utter conviction. **"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."**

Those who trust Christ, and those alone, can rest in the assurance that He has redeemed them from the curse of the law. Of course, we are supposed to continue to cultivate the virtues held forth in the law, and I trust that you do. The Ten Commandments are still instructive in showing us how we

ought to live. We love the law. And we can do so without any fear of the curse of the law, because Christ became a curse on our behalf.