

The Christian Life (15): The Tenth Commandment

The tenth commandment uniquely addresses the heart and the sanctity of our desires. "It is the safeguard of all the precepts of the second table; and it comes in at the close, to remind us that the heart must be pure as well as the life" (Dick).¹ The tenth commandment forbids covetousness and demands contentment. "Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have" (Heb.13:5).

Q. *What is required in the tenth commandment?* A. 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. Q. *What is forbidden in the tenth commandment?* A. The tenth commandment forbids all discontentment with our own estate, envying or grieving at the good of our neighbor, and all inordinate motions and affections to anything that is his.²

I. The Tenth Commandment

1. *It forbids covetousness.* The Hebrew word rendered "covet" literally means "desire" and can refer to either good or evil desires. There are three kinds of desires: natural, godly, and worldly (sinful). "Natural desires are the moderate, controlled desires that God planted in man before the fall, such as the desires to eat, drink, and sleep" (Udemans).³ "Godly desires are the holy and heavenly desires that are poured into believers by the Holy Spirit, such as love for God's laws, as well as spiritual hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Udemans).⁴ "Worldly desires are unbridled lusts both in quantity and quality. These are lusts for things that are evil in themselves, or for things that are permitted in themselves but misused by greed" (Udemans).⁵ It's the third of these that is forbidden by the tenth commandment. "There is an honest and lawful desire: when we desire those things which are lawful, to which we have right and of which we have need. There is, likewise, a wicked and sinful desire. We have both together in Gal.5:17; *The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh*" (Hopkins).⁶ Thus, to covet is to desire unlawful things or else to desire lawful things unlawfully. "He may be said to be covetous not only who gets the world unrighteously, but who loves it inordinately" (Watson).⁷ At its very core, the tenth commandment forbids all evil desires. "For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire (i.e., 'covetousness' as these are the same things)" (Rom.7:7-8). "Evil desire consists of those secret and internal sins which go before the consent of the will and which are the seeds of all evil. Lusting is the firstborn of indwelling depravity, the first risings and expressions of our corrupt nature" (Pink).⁸ Thus, the tenth commandment forbids all desire for unlawful things, desire for things that belongs to our neighbor, and inordinate desire for anything other than God.

The tenth commandment was not written in to the law of Moses without purpose. This commandment has a broader application than we have indicated, namely, if the dishonoring of God's name or the desire to take another's goods arises in our hearts, even

¹ John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 4:487

² Shorter Catechism, Q.80-81

³ Godefridus Udemans, *The Practice of Faith, Hope, and Love*, 474

⁴ Godefridus Udemans, *The Practice of Faith, Hope, and Love*, 474

⁵ Godefridus Udemans, *The Practice of Faith, Hope, and Love*, 474

⁶ Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:529

⁷ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 174

⁸ A.W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments*, 47

though we do not commit the act, this desire already is judged by God to be a transgression of His commandment. Therefore the Heidelberg Catechism says, "That even the smallest inclination or thought, contrary to any of God's commandments may never rise in our hearts."⁹

(1) Desire for unlawful things. The desire for any unlawful thing is sin. All sin starts with a desire. "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for good, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable (same word as 'covet') to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate" (Gen.3:6). This is how desire works. We see (think), desire, and take. Thus, desiring (if not addressed) leads to taking. But both are sin. To desire anything contrary to God's law is evil. "An inclination to evil must be itself evil, and an inclination to virtue is a virtuous tendency" (Dick).¹⁰ Thus, Paul expressly calls "evil desire" sin (Rom.7:8) and exhorts us to "put to death your members which are on the earth...passion, evil desire, and covetousness" (Col.3:5). These evil desires are referred to as concupiscence which can be viewed as original (habitual) or actual. When viewed as original or habitual it simply refers to the remains of original sin called the flesh. This is the cesspool from which actual evil desires arise. Thus, original concupiscence must be starved (Rom.13:14) and actual concupiscence denied and/or mortified (Rom.8:13).

(2) Desire for things that belong to others. "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's" (Ex.20:17). All of these things, a house, wife, servants, and animals, are lawful things, but the issue is they belong to someone else. "But why does this commandment speak of such common possessions (house, wife, manservant, maidservant, ox, or ass) if it has such far-reaching implications? The answer is this: covetousness begins with a dissatisfied heart. It begins when we compare our own situation with that of another who has (or appears to have) more than we do" (Williamson).¹¹ It's for this reason, the ninth commandment also forbids the related sins of jealousy and envy. Jealousy is wanting something someone has, whereas envy is desiring they didn't have it or renting them for having it. "Envy is a grief at another's good, when the parts and gifts of the mind, or strength and beauty of the body, or the wealth and outward prosperity, or the esteem and honor, or any good thing which another has, more than ourselves, is a grief or trouble to us" (Vincent).¹² "Stated briefly, we could say it this way: Anyone who sets his desires on his neighbor's house, wife, employees, or animals will not be able to keep his hands off. With premeditation he intends to strike. That is the primary meaning of the tenth commandment" (Douma).¹³

This precept teaches us how we ought to be affected towards our neighbor. As we should abstain from an open invasion of his rights, so we should harbor no uncharitable disposition towards him, no wish which is at variance with his happiness, and would lead us to encroach upon his honor, and property, and peace. It condemns all dissatisfaction with our lot; and all intentions, as well as endeavors, to change it by any means inconsistent with justice and love to our neighbor, and with entire submission to the will of God.¹⁴

⁹ G.H. Kersten, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 2:247-248

¹⁰ John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 4:488

¹¹ G.I. Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism*, 2:77

¹² Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained from Scripture*, 212

¹³ J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, 341

¹⁴ John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 4:489

(3) Inordinate desire for anything other than God. "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col.3:5). "For this you know that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God" (Eph.5:5). Idolatry is when we put anything in place of God or when we worship something before or alongside God. Thus, covetousness is idolatry because we want something more than anything else. Covetousness equates created things with the Creator and elevates the creature above the Creator. Nothing desires our entire heart and desires except for God Himself. "Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You" (Ps.73:25).

"We may properly insist that the 'coveting' of the tenth commandment lies somewhere between the disposition and the deed. The deed has been condemned by the preceding commandments, especially 'You shall not commit adultery' and 'You shall not steal.' But the tenth commandment looks behind those deeds to the passionate heart and to the steps a person takes to implement the plans he has forged in his heart" (Douma).¹⁵ Ezekiel Hopkins described four steps or degrees of covetousness. "The degrees of this evil desire are four: viz., the first bubble-ups of evil thoughts in our hearts; our complacency and delight in them; the assent and allowance of our judgment; and the decree and resolution of our wills; each of these is forbidden in this commandment." (Hopkins).¹⁶ Most theologians reduce these stages into three as suggested by James 1:14-15: "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin." Temptation is presented, desire is aroused, and sin is conceived.

(a) The presentation of sin. While God never tempts or entices to sin (Jas.1:13), James makes clear that ultimately all temptation to sin comes from within. "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed" (Jas.1:14). "Even the suggestions of the devil do not occasion danger, before they are made 'our own'" (Moo).¹⁷ No man has ever sinned without first tempting himself. This is why we are always accountable for every sin. This is the first thing the flesh does; it suggests some sin to the mind. "Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from sinful desires which war against the soul" (1Pet.2:11). "*God saw...that every imagination of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil continually*" (Gen.6:5); that is, the very first figment and flushing of our thoughts, is evil and corrupt. Indeed some of these are injected by the Devil. But there are other first motions arising up in our hearts towards those sins, which are more delightful and pleasant to our sensual inclinations; these, as soon as ever they but begin to heave and stir in our breasts, are truly sins" (Hopkins).¹⁸

(b) The agreement of sin. Having presented the soul with a tempting object, the flesh now entices it. "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed" (Jas.1:14). This means the soul begins to agree that the sinful object is appealing. It becomes attracted to it or persuaded by it. "A further degree of this evil desire, is, when these evil motions are entertained in the sensual mind with some measure of complacency and delight. When a sinful object offers itself to a carnal heart, there is a kind of inward pleasing titillation, that affects it with delight, and begets a kind of sympathy between them. That is, between a carnal heart and a sensual object, the heart is taken and delighted with it, before it has had time to consider what there is in it that should so move and affect it" (Hopkins).¹⁹

¹⁵ J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, 341

¹⁶ Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:532

¹⁷ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, 75

¹⁸ Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:530-531

¹⁹ Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:531

(c) The conception of sin. "Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin" (Jas.1:15). This doesn't deny that the previous stages were sinful (it's always sinful to tempt anyone including yourself) but speaks of the birth of "actual sin" as opposed to "habitual sin." By "habitual sin" older writers meant the breathings of the flesh prior to the actual consent of the will (to the actual temptation). In contrast to this, "actual sin" refers to the soul's agreement and approval of the temptation. "Sin intrudes upon the spirit by degrees. Lust begets strong and vigorous motions, or pleasing and delightful thoughts, which draw the mind to a full and clear consent; and then sin is hatched and disclosed" (Manton).²⁰

The devil goes about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. He deviously leads man to such opportunities and objects which he knows are suitable to ignite a specific inclination in him. He is like a peddler who asks: 'Do you not wish to do this? Do you not have a desire for this? This is beautiful and delightful.' As long as one does not listen to this, or inclines himself in any way, but chases such suggestions away as flies from his countenance, it is not his sin, but the devil's. Such temptations are not a man's thoughts, but rather the devil speaking to a man. If, however, inclinations begin to stir within the heart and one begins to listen, then he is guilty, even though the initial cause may have proceeded from the devil. I say, 'may have proceeded' for man's heart itself continually generates all manner of vanity and sinful lusts, and it is thus necessary to distinguish whether the initiative came from the devil or from one's self. For as soon as there is the least inclination of the heart, there is sin.²¹

Brakel then suggested two ways to discern "the interjections, buffetings, and fiery darts of the devil."²²

"(1) They arise in a frightful manner, for we are somewhat favorably inclined toward that which proceeds from the heart, giving such thoughts either full reign or being naturally inclined to reflect upon them. The thoughts interjected by Satan, however, are resisted due to the absurdity and abominableness of the matter, since they are contrary to the natural conscience, or they are resisted by the grace, fear, and love of God." "(2) They are recognized by the fact that they come from without, and thought after thought is forcefully impressed, contrary to all opposition. This is similar to a person putting his fingers in his ears in order not to hear what the other person is saying. The other person calls out so loudly, however, and comes so close that he nevertheless hears it. Everyone will then perceive that it is not the sin of the hearer, but of the one who speaks evil. Such is also the case here."

Therefore, the one who is assaulted must note this as a trial from God (who gives the devil free reign) as a sorrowful cross, and not as his sin. This consideration will strengthen him and enable him to endure these onslaughts all the better. All he needs to do is flee the temptation. He must especially not concern himself with it, but rather despise it as an abomination of the devil, who will for this reason be punished. Such a person cannot repel this, but it will strengthen him to give no heed thereto, and it will thus be less injurious. And if he receives some breathing room, he must earnestly pray to the Lord – yes, during these assaults he must cry with his heart to God. He will have that much more liberty to do so if he takes note that it is not his sin, but rather that he is being tormented with these thoughts.²³

²⁰ Thomas Manton, *Works*, 4:100

²¹ Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:240-241

²² Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:241

²³ Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:241-242

2. *It demands contentment.* "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."²⁴ "Contentment with our own condition, is obviously a duty which this command enjoins. The reason that we covet the things which belong to our neighbor is, that we are not fully pleased with the portion which God has assigned to us" (Dick).²⁵ Contentment can simply be defined as satisfaction with your present situation in life. "Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content" (Phil.4:11). "Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have" (Heb.13:5). "And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content" (1Tim.6:8). "Contentment is a sweet temper of spirit, whereby a Christian carries himself in an equal poise in every condition" (Watson).²⁶ "Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition" (Burroughs).²⁷ "Contentment with our own condition does consists in our free submission and satisfaction with God's disposal of us, whereby we like our present condition, as best, and most fit for us" (Vincent).²⁸ "Contentment says, as Jacob did, *I have enough* (Gen.33:11). 'I have a promise of heaven and have sufficient grace to bring me thither; I have enough.' He who has enough, will not covet that which is another's" (Watson).²⁹

(1) Is contentment contrary to deep sorrow and grief? No, contentment is consistent with a deep sense of our pain and anguish. Otherwise we would be stoics not saints. "Rachel did well to weep for her children—there was nature; but her fault was, she refused to be comforted—there was discontentment. Christ Himself was sensible when He sweat great drops of blood, and said, 'Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me' (Matt.26:39); yet He was content and sweetly submitted His will—'nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt.' The apostle tells us to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, 1Peter 5:6, which we cannot do unless we are sensible of it" (Watson).³⁰

(2) Is contentment contrary to cries and complaints to God? No, contentment is consistent with humble prayers and cries to God for help. "Jeremiah cried to God, 'Unto Thee I have opened my cause' (Jer.20:12), and David poured out his complaint before the Lord (Ps.142:2). We may cry to God, and desire Him to write down all our injuries. Shall not the child complain to his father? When any burden is upon the spirit, prayer gives vent, it eases the heart. Hannah's spirit was burdened: 'I am,' says she, 'a woman of a sorrowful spirit' (1Sam.1:15). Now, having prayed and wept, she went away, and was no more sad. Only here is the difference between a holy complaint and a discontented complaint; in the one we complain *to* God, in the other we complain *of* God" (Watson).³¹

(3) Is contentment contrary to a desire to improve our condition in life? No, contentment is consistent with diligent labor as well as prayers to God to improve our condition. For example, John the Baptist told the penitent soldiers, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages" (Lk.3:14). But if their wages were not sufficient to pay their bills and provide for their family, they

²⁴ Shorter Catechism, Q.80

²⁵ John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 4:489

²⁶ Thomas Watson, *The Art of Divine Contentment*, 31

²⁷ Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, 2

²⁸ Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained from Scripture*, 208

²⁹ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 182

³⁰ Thomas Watson, *The Art of Contentment*, 28

³¹ Thomas Watson, *The Art of Contentment*, 29

would have to get another or else a second job. Contentment must never be confused with a lazy and/or indifferent spirit.

Every Christian can and should live in the bodies they have, in the houses they own, with the husband or wife God has given them, with the jobs they have. There is no objection against striving for a better position. But there is an unchristian chasing after affluence, the kind that leaves us constantly looking with a cynical eye at what somebody else has (more than we have). In contrast to this, the starting point of the tenth commandment is very simply this: Your own house is the best one *for you*, your own spouse is the most pretty or handsome *for you*, in your own boy lies the most fruitful development of *your abilities*, even though your house may be smaller than your neighbor's, though your wife may be less attractive than other women, though your job may rank lower on the scale of values than those of your friends and acquaintances, and so on.³²

Q. *Whence doth discontentment with our own estate arise?* A. Discontentment with our own estate doth arise? 1. From our not believing or not trusting the providence of God, who orders every particular circumstance of our estate and condition and has promised to order it for the best. 2. From pride and overvaluing ourselves, as if we had some desert of our own, and such high thoughts, as if it were fit that such worthy persons as we are should be in a better condition than that wherein God has placed us. 3. From a carnal heart, filled with inordinate self-love, which, if God's providence does not gratify with full provisions for the flesh, it does vex and grieve, and is disquieted. 4. From inordinate affections unto, and expectations of and from, these outward things, which causes inordinate grief and trouble in the loss of these things, and great discontent in the disappointment of what we expected of them, and from them.³³

Q. *How may we be cured of discontentment with our own estate?* A. We may be cured of discontentment with our own estate, by mourning for it, and application of ourselves unto the Lord Jesus Christ for pardon and healing, and by the diligent use of the means of grace, for the attainment of the grace of true contentment.³⁴

³² J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, 345

³³ Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained from Scripture*, 211-212

³⁴ Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained from Scripture*, 212