

**GOD’S TOP TEN – THE TEN COMMANDMENTS TODAY!
#10 DO NOT COVET
or “The Grass is Always Greener on the Other Side”**

The Ten Commandments have been around for 3,500 years. They are 300 words long. The three great world religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam, acknowledge them as God Word. They have formed the basis of many of our Western laws. They are stamped, by divine design, in the conscience of every person to help us know the difference between right and wrong.

There was a time when everyone knew the Ten Commandments, but as Christian memory fades in our society, they are becoming increasingly unknown. Where they are still known then it is not as “*Ten Commandments*” but rather as “*Ten Suggestions*” that contemporary people have no problem overruling with their own personal beliefs and opinions.

To some, the commandments are just ancient words with no relevance today. To others, they are legalistic and intolerant, out of step with our culture and its more liberal values. But perhaps we owe it to ourselves to take a second look at them. After all we live in a world of fractured family life, changing moral values, and growing violence. We struggle with issues of genetic engineering, human sexuality, terrorism, assisted suicide, and a whole host of other issues. Our personal lives are often in great turmoil as well. Could it be that we still need the Ten Commandment to help us navigate life?

Let me give you three reasons why I think the Ten Commandments are still very relevant. First, if there is a God who created us, and who has revealed himself to us in Scripture, then surely we need to listen to what He commands us to do. Second, despite all our human progress, it is pretty clear from watching the news, that human nature is no different now than it was when the Ten Commandments were first given. So the commandments still speak to our human condition. Third, when you really examine the Ten Commandments you discover that they are not really laws meant to restrict us or to control us. They are meant to free us to live in harmony with God and others. So today we begin a series I’m calling “*God’s Top Ten!*” We’ll start with #10 and work our way to #1.

The great church reformer Martin Luther once noted that the tenth commandment, which is, “*Do not covet*”, is really a restatement of the other nine commandments, because keeping the other nine requires us to be fully content with God, and with all that God has given us. So here’s is the Tenth Commandment. Exodus 20:17 (NLT), ¹⁷ ***“You must not covet your neighbor’s house. You must not covet your neighbor’s wife, male or female servant, ox or donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.”***

Now that word “covet” is not a word we use a lot today. It means “*want, crave, desire, long for or lust after*”. Coveting is expressed in some of our most popular phrases like, “*The grass is greener on the other side*”, “*Our yearning always exceed our earning*” and “*However long it takes you to choose your dessert, when the other person’s dessert arrives you realize you’ve made the wrong choice.*”

Coveting is about craving, desiring, longing for, lusting after, what you don't have, to the point that this craving dominates your life, and you decide you can't be happy without what you covet.

The root of coveting is a lack of contentment that is fueled by selfishness. Go right back to the beginning of the Bible where the desire to covet first shows itself when Satan sowed in Adam and Eve the desire to be like God. That original sin is still around, isn't it? We want to live as 'god' over our own lives and destinies. We want to do what we want to do. James, the brother of Jesus, expressed it this way. 4:1-2 (NLT), ***"What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you? You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it.*"**

Coveting is a major issue in our society. It sets nations against nations. Employees against employers. Family members against family members. Think about it. Isn't the phrase *"Keeping up with the Jones's"* a form of coveting? Isn't it why so many people go to casinos, or buy lottery tickets, because they believe more money will solve all their problems? Isn't coveting the reason so many Canadians are in debt because we've bought things we can't afford to impress people we don't even like? Millionaire John. D. Rockefeller was once asked, *"How much money does it take for a person to be really satisfied?"* He replied, *"Just a little bit more."* That's the power that coveting has over us. It causes us to never be satisfied.

The great sixteenth century church reformer John Calvin once declared, ***"For we are born first of all for God, and not for ourselves"***. Covetousness reverses that truth. When we forget to keep God in the center of our lives, by default, we try to fill the hole in our lives with all kinds of other things. And that is actually idolatry. Listen to Jesus. He gives us the corrective to covetousness. Matthew 6:33 (GNB), ³³ ***Instead, be concerned above everything else with the Kingdom of God and with what he requires of you, and he will provide you with all these other things.***

Now you have to understand here that this tenth commandment is not like the other nine commandments. It doesn't talk about wrong action, like bowing down before false gods, or stealing, or committing adultery. Its focus is on the intention to act in a wrong way. In Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament, the word for covet actually means, *"to lay a plan to take"*, or *"to have in mind to do a certain thing."* That's why Martin Luther, the reformer, said that the other nine commandments were summed up in this one, because this is where sin is birthed, in our thoughts, in our desires, in our planning, and in our hearts. This is where the attitudes are fostered that lead us into sin.

Here's one example of that. The great Old Testament King David, once saw a really beautiful married woman named Bathsheba, and he started to covet her. He lusted after her and ended up using his power as King to sleep with her. She became pregnant. He then conspired to have

her husband, a soldier in his army, killed in battle in order to cover up the whole incident. So he broke the seventh commandment, *“Do not commit adultery”*, the sixth commandment, *“Do not commit murder”* and then the ninth *“You shall not give false testimony”*. But here’s the thing, none of these things would have happened if David had obeyed the tenth commandment, *“You shall not covet”*.

So how do we defend ourselves against covetousness so we can keep this tenth commandment? First, we need to understand that many of the things we covet are illusions. An anonymous poet once put it this way:

Money can buy medicine but it cannot buy health. Money can buy a house, but not a home. Money can buy companionship, but not friendship. Money can buy entertainment, but not happiness. Money can buy food, but not an appetite. Money can buy a bed, but not sleep. Money can buy a crucifix, but not a Saviour.

Second, we need to remember that the things we covet are temporary, not eternal. Do you remember the parable Jesus told in Luke 12:18-21 (Msg), ¹⁶⁻¹⁹ ***Then he told them this story: “The farm of a certain rich man produced a terrific crop. He talked to himself: ‘What can I do? My barn isn’t big enough for this harvest.’ Then he said, ‘Here’s what I’ll do: I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll gather in all my grain and goods, and I’ll say to myself, Self, you’ve done well! You’ve got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!’*** ²⁰ ***“Just then God showed up and said, ‘Fool! Tonight you die. And your barnful of goods—who gets it?’*** ²¹ ***“That’s what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God.”***

Third, we have to understand that fear is what feeds covetousness. A recent survey revealed that the number one fear of North Americans is not nuclear war, or environmental disaster, or even the Spice Girls reuniting. The number one fear is not having enough money, or losing what we already have. With that fear, is it really a surprise that people focus their priorities not on God and what he requires of them, but on material things, and position and power? Consider this. The most frequent command in the Bible appears 370 times. ***“Do not fear/ Do not be afraid.”*** Why is that? It’s because God can be trusted. The problem with covetousness is that it undermines that trust.

Fourth, to defeat covetousness we need to focus on relationships and not on things. Let’s remember that God calls us to love people and to use things, not the other way around. How many marriages have been destroyed by covetousness? How many families have been sacrificed because one or both parents put all their energies into climbing the corporate ladder? And did you know that a survey of big lottery winners concluded that their win made their life more difficult, not easier?

One of my favourite authors J. John suggests that if you don’t live by priorities then you live by pressure. So he suggests we need to think about what our priorities are by asking ourselves these questions. What do I talk about the most? What do I invest my time and energy into?

What do I spend my money on? What would I find hard to give up in order to save my closest relationships?

Fifth, we defeat covetousness by cultivating “an attitude of gratitude.” Covetousness is the great enemy of gratitude and contentment. It makes us dissatisfied with what we already have, whether that is our spouse, our car, our home, our job, our standard of living. We need to cultivate the attitude of the apostle Paul who said in Philippians 4:12-13 (Msg), ***“I’ve learned by now to be quite content whatever my circumstances. I’m just as happy with little as with much, with much as with little. I’ve found the recipe for being happy whether full or hungry, hands full or hands empty. Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am.”***

The bottom line. Covetousness creates discontent but gratitude makes us content with what we have.

So is the tenth commandment still relevant in the 21st century? Yes! In fact, perhaps it is as relevant as it has ever been since you and I are part of one of the wealthiest, and most materialistic, generations that have ever lived. And yet, despite that, so many in our society are discontented, angry, and alienated. But is that really a big surprise? When we covet things we are turning our backs on God as Creator and Provider. We’re saying in effect that we believe he can’t meet our needs, that His promises are not true, and that we humans know better than He does about what bring satisfaction in our lives. So let’s close with a warning from Paul to his friend Timothy about what happens when we break God’s commandments. Second Timothy 3:1-4 (Msg), ***You should know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times. 2 For people will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. 3 They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control. They will be cruel and hate what is good. 4 They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God.***

Do not covet. Are you ready to commit yourself anew to keeping that tenth commandment?

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, our Creator:

Teach us to be a grateful people.

Teach us to be a content people.

Teach us not to chase after others, but to pursue you instead, and to seek first your kingdom in all that we do.

We pray for those whose lives have been shattered by Hurricane Harvey and now Hurricane Irma.

We mourn the loss of lives.

We pray for those who have lost loved ones,

or their homes, and livelihoods.

We cannot imagine the devastation we have seen in news reports.

We pray for the emergency service workers
and for their safety.

We ask for wisdom for those responsible
for managing relief and rebuilding efforts.

We remember those in our congregation and community
who are mourning the loss of a loved one
and we pray comfort upon them.

We remember the sick,
and the family members who support them,
and we pray healing and strength upon them.

We pray for ourselves, and for our families,
and for those within our family circle.

You know us best. You know our needs.

Teach us to seek out, and to trust, your provision for us.

And finally we pray,
as a new season of congregational activities begin,
that you would bless our ministry in this community
that it may bring glory to you through Jesus Christ our Lord,
in whose name we pray. Amen.