

The Tenth Commandment (Ex. 20:17) | August 9, 2026

[2] Introduction

Let's look at this commandment in three movements. First, the *essence* of the law — what it is, what it says, what it means; the *effect* of the law — what actually happens when it lands in sinful hearts like yours and mine; and the *end* of the law — what it's heading for, what it's been aiming for all along.

1. The Essence of the Law

[3] So first, the essence of the law. What can we say about the essence of the tenth commandment?

[4] (Blank) This commandment is unique in the sense that whereas with enough effort and enough self-deception, the first nine commands can be kept, at least on the outside, this law can't be. It can't be because it looks past our behavior all the way down to our desires themselves. It doesn't ask what we've done, it asks what we *want*. It's like a spiritual x-ray machine. It reveals not just the tumor but the malignancy itself all the way down to the cellular level.

It's unique, too, in its construction. There are seven prohibitions: not to covet your neighbor's house, his wife; his male servant, his female servant; his ox, his donkey; or anything else that is your neighbor's. Seven. Which in the Bible is the perfect number, pointing to the perfection of God's creation *ex nihilo* and to the inherent perfection in all that God is and does.

[5] The Hebrew verb “to covet” is *tachMOHD*, which in the Greek Septuagint [6] is translated as *epithymēō* (or the noun, *epithymia*). It's frequently referred to as [7] “over desire” or “possessive desire,” the kind

where something you want becomes something you just *have to have*. [8]
(Blank)

In the Bible, *epithymia* often refers to sexual desire, but the root idea is more underspecified – it can be used positively, like when Jesus says to his disciples, “With desire, I have desired to eat this Passover with you,” or when Paul talks about his “*epithymia*” being to depart and be with Christ. *Epithymia* isn’t necessarily about desiring bad things so much as it’s desiring good things too much or too badly.

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis asks us to imagine a country where they [9] put on strip-tease acts that draw huge cheering crowds — except what’s being slowly uncovered on stage isn’t a young lady but a covered plate of food – which in America might be, I suppose, a mouth-watering *cheeseburger* – and everybody’s cheering and salivating basically going crazy. I mean, you’d think that something had gone really seriously wrong with the appetite for food in that country!

And that’s the point Lewis is making [10] (Blank). When a natural appetite is cut off from its proper end, its proper ordering, it doesn’t just disappear; it inflates, it becomes obsessive, even grotesque. Lewis is showing that the “lusts of the flesh” can be any appetite that’s become unhinged and unhooked and ultimately tyrannical.

Coveting is everywhere in our lives. Our culture doesn’t talk about it for the same reason fish don’t talk about water; it’s just taken for granted, it’s just in the air they breathe. We all covet, all of us – quite a bit I think. I certainly do. The evidence is on our phones, in our shopping carts, in our wish lists, the “content we consume.”

And of course the big one is now social media. The friends you went to high school with who are now doing so much better than you, who look so much younger than you do, who are clearly so much happier than you are. We're always comparing, always wanting something they have that we don't. And of course it makes us miserable. We inevitably start down the rabbit hole of, if only I were *thin* enough or *buff* enough or *successful* enough or *popular* enough or even "*Christian* enough..."

There's a word for this – another word we don't hear much of any more. *Envy*. Envy is *comparative* desiring. It's "zero sum coveting." The neighbor's good becomes my deficit.

[11] Jonathan Edwards, the great Northampton revivalist, defines envy as:

"... a spirit of dissatisfaction with, and opposition to, the prosperity and happiness of others as compared with our own. It is a disposition natural in men, that they love to be uppermost; and this disposition is directly crossed when they see others above them."

Envy is when you see they've got something better than you and instead of rejoicing in the good they have, you resent them for it. It brings no joy whatsoever; it saps your joy, it poisons your ability to enjoy what God's given you. You carry other people's success around with you like a low-grade grief. [12] (Blank)

Remember Haman in the story of Esther? Haman has wealth, position, the king's favor- everything he could want – and what does he say? [13]

"Yet all this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate."

“All this!” – all his wealth, all his privilege – “means *nothing* to him.”
Haman couldn’t enjoy what he had simply because Mordecai was enjoying it, too! [14 (blank)]

The unique *weight* of the 10th commandment is that it has no external behavior to police; it exposes a disorder below the surface, at the level of what we love and want: what really makes you happy, what you’re really living *for*. Which means coveting is ultimately a form of misdirected worship - the heart looking somewhere other than God for its worth and joy. [Slide 15]

2. The Effect of the Law

Okay so what’s the *effect* of the Tenth commandment on our lives? Well, in the seventh chapter of Romans, Paul has a lot to say about his own experience of the effect that the law (and this law in particular) has when it encounters a proud and self-righteous human being like himself. Starting in verse 7, Paul writes: [16]

If it had not been for the law – the 10th commandment - 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.’

Paul starts by simply saying that the effect on him of the law against coveting was to reveal “what it is to covet” – what it actually means and what it implies with respect to our righteousness. He says something similar earlier in the letter: “through the law comes the knowledge of sin.”

But then [17] he goes on to say something quite a bit stranger:

But *sin*, seizing an opportunity *through* the commandment, produced in me all *kinds* of covetousness.

All kinds of covetousness? Paul seems to be saying the law's effect on him, at least at first, wasn't obedience but *provocation*... that the command against wanting only *inflamed the wanting!* And not just that, but that somehow this happened because *sin* had "seized an opportunity" – the word here suggests a fulcrum or a foothold – from which it was able to *use* the law, "latch onto the law," to *produce* in him "all kinds of covetousness."

[18] He goes on:

I was once alive apart from the law - *I felt alive, I thought I was righteous, I thought I was blameless before God* - but when the commandment came - *or we might say, came home to him, when it really hit him* – then sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.

Paul is saying once he understood what the tenth commandment actually means, "sin came alive" and he died. [19] (Blank) And that's because at that moment, the command not to covet became to him a mirror that shattered his whole idea of himself as a good person. The sinner was discovered to himself. Paul realized that there isn't really any coveting that you *do*; there is only coveting that you *are*.

[20] Martin Luther describes this experience with characteristic bluntness:

When we speak about the law, we are speaking about the law's proper effect which it can have or perform in our corrupt nature. The law condemns and drives us. By itself – *which is an important qualifier for Luther, by the way* – it cannot do anything but afflict, ruin, and agitate consciences.

Okay let's take a step back [21] (blank) and let me try to frame all this from a more contemporary vantage point. There was a professor at the University of Chicago named Lauren Berlant who wrote a book in 2011 about something she called '[22] cruel optimism.' She defines cruel optimism as:

"...the condition that obtains when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. Cruel optimism is a punishing attachment to the expectation that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way, no matter how often it does not actually work out that way."

Here Berlant is describing a very specific dynamic through which human beings participate irrationally in the generation of their own suffering, where the very thing we've hooked our wagon to as *the thing* that will deliver what our heart most desires, ends up proving to be precisely the thing that prevents us from obtaining it. [23] (Blank)

Do you hear what she's saying? That's the language of idolatry. That's the heart looking at a created thing and asking it to be the ground of its hope and its meaning – which isn't something it was made to do. It'll just buckle, just as it did for Paul and his own "cruel attachment" to being "a Pharisee of Pharisees."

So what Paul describes in these verses, what Luther observes so pessimistically, and what Lauren Berlant describes in secular terms with her "cruel optimism," are all a manifestation of the experience of life before the law as sinful human beings, and of the futility of looking to created goods as ends in themselves.

The effect of this 10th commandment, and of the Mosaic law in general, is to show imperfect human beings our sin, our idolatry, and in so doing to reveal that we all have a *god* problem before we have a *wanting* problem.

Thankfully this isn't the end of the story. The sheer scope of this law actually *serves* the gospel of grace because it closes every possible escape route except the one that leads to Jesus Christ and to the promise that there is therefore now no condemnation in him. The law's indictment becomes the prelude to grace. It can no longer condemn us because we are no longer under the law but under grace. Christ has been raised, death has lost its sting, and we can sing, "Well may the accuser roar of things that I have done. I know them all and thousands more. Jehovah knoweth none."

3. The End of the Law

[25] When Paul says in Romans 10 that "Christ is the end of the law," the word for "end" is [26] *telos*, and it means two things at once: It means *terminus* — the finish line, the place where the ten commandments stop. Which is not to say the law goes away, but that the law *as a path to righteousness* is obsolete because Christ has met everything it required in your place. [27] John Calvin puts it like this:

Christ is the completion of the law because whatever righteousness the law demanded is found perfectly in him. [28] (Blank)

But *Telos* also means *goal or aim*, what the law was aiming for from the beginning. And it turns out the aim of the law — the thing the law was reaching for the entire time — was never about mere behavior. *It was above love*. "Love is the fulfillment of the law," Paul says in Romans 13. "Owe no one anything except to love each other, for the one who loves

another has fulfilled the law.” To the Galatians he says, “The whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

That Christ is the end of the law means God’s gift in you *creates* precisely the response that it seeks. Grace is not only God’s pardon but God’s effective agency within you, both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

Well okay how does that actually work?

Turns out Augustine asked exactly this, and the verse he kept going back to again and again was Romans 5:5: [29]:

“God’s love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

And because desire responds to being desired, love responds to being loved – to being loved *first* – he was then able to say: [30]

[Human beings] receive the Holy Spirit so that there arises in their minds a delight in and a love for that highest and immutable good that is God, even now while they walk by faith, not yet by sight.

Augustine is saying God pours his love into our hearts – in worship, in preaching, through the Lord’s Supper, the Bible, Christian community, *real Christian friends* — what we call ‘the means of grace’ — in such a way that he becomes more delightful and desirable than anything we could ever want more than him. [31] (Blank)

Friends, our whole *problem* is that the law commands a love it could never create. Our whole *solution* is that the grace in the gift of Jesus Christ heals our disordered affections and creates genuine freedom to actually begin to want what God wants.

The 19th century [32] Scottish Presbyterian minister Thomas Chalmers drew on Augustine for what he called, "the expulsive power of a new affection." He argued that

The only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one.

Chalmers is saying you're never going to be able to persuade your heart out of what it loves, it simply won't work. And the reason it won't work is that the heart *cannot be without an object*, it simply *cannot NOT* have something to love. The inferior love can only be displaced – expelled by a new affection that comes to be seen as more attractive and more desirable than the old one. [33] (Blank)

Consider someone trapped in pornography and all the underlying shame and loneliness that sustain his addiction. A habit like that doesn't go away just by trying harder. [34] As Martin Luther puts it, *I do not free myself from myself by trying to free myself from myself*. No: the solution has to come from outside the system in a form that's perceived to be more fulfilling and more truly satisfying than the false promise of the addiction. [35] (Blank)

And because this realization always remains incomplete and is always being tested, the Christian repeatedly returns to grace. That return is not the opposite of progress. It is progress's permanent form, the permanent shape of progress. We mature in Christ by becoming more truthfully dependent on him, not less.

Tim Keller's ministry in New York was often about saying something pretty similar. Tim called it "preaching to the idols of your heart," and what he

adds to Chalmers is his insight that anything our hearts love other than God is a created thing that simply was never built to satisfy the deep in-born neediness that is natural to the human heart.

“Preaching to the heart” begins by naming the actual desires that are moving you. “What other things have become more real to me than the love of Jesus? What am I loving – what am I coveting - more than him?” Then you just put those desires up against Jesus Christ in his gospel and you ask, “What is true of me because Christ has died and been raised for me? What good is being offered in Him that my rival desires can’t finally provide?”

[36] Keller writes this:

[The solution to behavior change] is to apply the gospel to our hearts’ idols, which are always an alternate form of self-salvation apart from Jesus. We will never change unless we come to grips with the particular, characteristic ways our hearts resist the gospel and continue their self-salvation projects through idolatry.

Repentance for Tim was always about identifying these idols and exposing them to the gospel until it produced what he called “a sense on the heart of God’s love.” “A sense on the heart,” that was his phrase, all the time. [37]

(Blank) Like Augustine, like Chalmers, Tim understood that you don’t “conclude and see” that the Lord is good. You *taste* and see. You’re *shown* God’s goodness. You start to understand it in a way that, as Paul says in Ephesians, “surpasses understanding.”

“Encounter with God,” if we can broadly call it that, can simply be understood as having taken place when something you’ve always known as information becomes something about *you*. When something about God that you’ve always understood and affirmed to be true as a concept, becomes something true about *you*.

It's not "God so loved the world; it's God so loved *you*." It's not "While we were still sinners Christ died for us," it's "While you were still a sinner Christ died for *you*."

You are the prodigal the Father ran to meet. *You* are the lost coin, the pearl of great price, the lamb for whom the shepherd left the other ninety-nine. *You* are the one he rejoices over with singing, like a bridegroom over a bride. And yes, *you* are the one for whom Christ endured the cross, despising its shame. *You are that person.*

John Wesley, the great hymn writer, had always known that God forgives sins. But the penny didn't drop for him until the day he went from "God forgives sins" to "God forgives sins, *even mine*." *Even mine, even yours.*

If you're here today and you're not a Christian or you're not really sure you're a Christian, or if you're a believer who's just going through a rough patch in your Christian life: I'm here to tell you that what the gospel offers you - again and again, every new day - is a person whose character is so extraordinarily remarkable, so attractive, who loves you with a love that is so particular, so unrepeatable, so entirely aimed at *you*, that once you see it, you can never un-see it.

Our covetous hearts say, *if I had that, I would be happy*. The Father says: "at my right hand are pleasures forevermore; in my presence is fullness of joy."

Our heart says, *if I could just get that, that'd be enough*. The Bible says: the earth is the Lord's and everything in it; the silver is his, the gold is his, his are the cattle on a thousand hills. He opens his hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing.

Toward the end of Romans 8 we come to one of the most magisterial verses in the entire Bible, where Paul says, “He who did not spare his only son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”

God is saying, "I've given you my Son, my only Son whom I love. I've given you the greatest thing that can! If I've done that, given you the greatest thing I have, do you think I'm going to withhold lesser things from you? Do you think I'm going to keep from you the pleasures you need? I know the pleasures that you need, I know you, I know how I made you." So stop reaching for false ones, he says. *I will give you the desires of your heart.*

Before we ever get to Christ in the gospels, the tenth commandment is already gospel-shaped, it's already pointing toward grace. Why? Because the command “Thou shalt not covet” already *assumes* a God who is so good, so generous, so abundant, that to want anything *more* than Him isn't wrong so much as it's just folly. Everything our coveting hearts were ever reaching for, we have in Him because of Jesus Christ. Which means the command that says “Do not covet,” at its core, is actually just the flip side of God's *promise* "I am enough." Let's pray.