

Coveting the Covenant: Treasuring God and Conquering Corrupt Desires

David Stehlik

Regent University

Abstract

The tenth commandment of the Decalogue prohibits the coveting of one's neighbor's possessions, including his wife. Essentially, God commands his people to not desire that which he has not given them. Detailed within is an argument for what this prohibition really means and why it is desirable for God's people to follow. Furthermore, the argument advanced explains the troubles of the one who dismisses God's Law, especially in the contemporary leadership setting. Ultimately, the antidote to coveting other people's things is to covet God above all. This antidote will "right" the leader and prepare him for any turbulence he may face. Additionally, he will be able to properly relate to God with praise and thanksgiving, demonstrate his contentedness in rejoicing, and prove his thanks by manifesting love and kindness in his organization.

Keywords: covet, leadership, thanksgiving, desire, law

What Is The 10th Commandment?

This article focuses on Exodus 20:17: **“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,”** though recognizing the debate surrounding the actual content and breadth of the tenth commandment (English Standard Version). Verse 17, in its entirety, among many Jewish and Christian groups, “as far back as Philo and Josephus,” is considered to be the tenth commandment in the Decalogue and shall represent the tenth commandment for all intents and purposes herein (Baker, 2005, p. 3). But, given the similar commandment in the parallel passage in Deuteronomy 5:21, both words for “covet” are considered in this argument.

Foundations of the law

Before engaging in discussion of the tenth commandment's meaning and subsequent relationship and affect upon contemporary organizational leadership, the purpose of the commandments will be mentioned. The commandments, as a snapshot of the Law, are covenantal in nature. By this the image of the patron-client covenant relationship is invoked – the patron providing sustenance and protection and other manner of life-giving aid to the client, whose reciprocal expectation is to keep allegiance to the patron. When called upon, the client exercises faithfulness by heeding the patron's call. This is the nature of the covenant relationship. Kruger Joubert (2002) notes the purpose of the community in the covenantal Law, that the purpose in law-keeping was ultimately life (p. 375). The commands protected community harmony. Law-keeping honors God's love and grace in law-giving (to protect and provide for community life) as well as threatens law-breakers with the complementary characteristic of God – justice for those who threaten community life. Because God's reputation is always at stake as

the patron, and his clients look to his covenant-keeping as informing their own, he cannot overlook infractions, for such would bring the entire covenant's viability into question. With regard to the Decalogue, one should quickly recognize this characteristic faithfulness pre-established by God, for God had already delivered Israel prior to the coming of the Law. He had already provided evidence for Israel to be motivated to keep covenant. God led Israel out of Egypt, saving the people to himself and judging his enemies by plague and sea before leading Israel to the mountain of fire (Exod. 20:1-2).

God was not securing Israel's obedience with this Law so that he might save them. He was securing their obedience *because* he saved them. In reality, to not do so would have been to lead them into harm's way, for God cannot let another have the glory that is rightfully his. To direct them to do anything other than ally themselves under his banner would have been to set them a course to oppose him, for anything receiving glory for his work other than him is tantamount to blasphemy, suggesting he is lesser than another (cf. Isa. 48:9-11; Ezek. 32:22-32). Thus, God protected Israel not only by deliverance and promise, but he also protected them in providing the commandments. And, the promise of reward for obedience only strengthened the full mechanism that was to do them good. Thus, God saved the people, eliciting their praise (Exod. 15:1-21). Then, God gave them the Law, to protect them. And, the strength of the positive aspect of that Law is in the strength of motivation to obey it, which is founded in God's promise of abundant life i.e. why should you obey? Answer: the reward is infinitely desirable. Good motivations *should* have secured Israel in the covenant relationship with Yahweh. The entire situation was to be held together with right motivations informed by truth. However, these commandments are rarely discussed because of successful covenant-keeping.

The essence of covetousness

The tenth commandment is about covetousness, which is at the heart of evil, and central to covenant-breaking. In this command, God gave Moses a list of which none were to covet. Contrary to opinions regarding the significance of the, “neighbor’s wife” to covetousness, and why it is not related to adultery, Vasholz (1987) argued that the prohibition likely referred to the economic benefit she would have brought to her husband in the form of her dowry, which was practiced in the Near East and evidenced in the Old Testament (Gen. 31:14-16, Josh. 15:16-19; 1 Kings 9:16), and which her husband gained partial control over upon marriage (pp. 399-401). Regarding the content of the lists in the Exodus and Deuteronomy passages, Wright (1990) writes, “what the items have in common is not that they are pieces of property, but that they are typical of what may be the object of a neighbor’s coveting” (as cited in Baker, 2005, p. 6). Thus, the focus herein will not be on the given list of covetables; rather, it will be on the way in which the list is handled: by coveting.

The uniqueness of the tenth commandment is seen against the backdrop of the ancient Near East, as coveting is not mentioned in any of the law codes (though one in the Laws of Hammurabi comes close, it actually refers to theft) (Baker, 2005, p. 7). In the Exodus passage, the Hebrew word for covet, *hmd*, refers to, “desire that comes from seeing something beautiful,” it does not pertain to, “the ‘desire’ that is inherently human (concupiscence) but to the act of desire which is generated by the emotion, which follows a visual expression” (Kruger Joubert, 2002, p. 374). The other word for covet, or desire, found in the parallel passage in Deuteronomy 5:21, is *wh*, and it entails, “the desire that arises from an inner human need” (p. 374). Both words are adequately synonymous. Baker (2005) points out examples of their interchangeability in Proverbs 6:25 and Psalm 45:11 and Psalms 68:16 and 132:13-14, and writes,

It is clear that the two words are close in meaning and their use overlaps. Both are used in positive and negative contexts. Both are commonly used with reference to human desire but can also be used of the divine. It seems that desire is considered ethically neutral, neither commanded nor prohibited in itself...It is assumed that people—and God—will have desires, and the ethical issues concern whether the object of the desire is good and whether it may be obtained legitimately without harm to others. (p. 13)

Unlike the other commandments, therefore, the tenth commandment, “presupposes questions regarding the acceptability of mere desire” (Kruger Joubert, 2002, p. 374). Scholars have spilled much ink arguing whether coveting is just a matter of mental activity or if it requires some accompanying manifestation. However, since the publication of Moran (1967) and Jackson (1971), “many—though not all—Jewish and Christian interpreters,” have argued for the meaning of the command as dealing solely with intention, for it would be indistinguishable from the seventh and eighth commandments if it dealt solely with actions (Baker, 2005, p. 15). And, Baker writes,

The fact that coveting is followed by taking in Deuteronomy 7:25, Joshua 7:21, and Micah 2:2 does not prove that coveting *means* taking; on the contrary, the fact that a separate verb is used to denote the taking suggests that this is not necessarily implied by coveting. (p. 18)

He furthers his case that the tenth commandment deals only with thoughts and intentions, noting,

There are other passages in the Old Testament which indicate that intentions may be considered right or wrong in themselves, apart from any actions which result, for example Genesis 6:5, 1 Samuel 16:7 and 1 Kings 8:18. (p. 19)

Obviously, Yahweh cares about the thought life of his people, and such is illustrated well in the constant reminders of God's observation and judgment of men's hearts (Ps. 44:21; 2 Chron. 16:9; 1 Thess. 2:4; Rom. 2:6). And, coveting has to do with desiring things rightly or wrongly. Exodus 20:17 clearly condemns the heartfelt desiring of, "anything that is your neighbor's." Yet, God is good and not begrudging in bestowing grace (Rom. 8:28); and, since the precedent was set in vv. 1-2 that God commanded these laws based on a relationship already founded in gracious deliverance, then it is right to assume that this commandment presupposes what one should covet, namely, God himself.

God is the source of all good to men (Deut. 8:18; Acts 17:24-25; 1 Cor. 3:7; James 1:5, 17; Matt. 5:17). He is infinitely desirable and worthy of men's acclamation, especially because he promises to further his gift-giving as men seek him (Heb. 11:6). Thus, he can rightly command his people to, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thess. 5:16-18). His people should have no reason to desire beyond the scope of his provision (including future promises), and so they are reminded:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

God tells them that these desires of the world do not satisfy. And, the same was true in Jeremiah's day; in fact, it was the reason the people were being called into judgment. They were breaking faith. The prophet spoke,

Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

(Jer. 2:12-13)

The essence of their sin was covetousness, for it flowed out of rotten hearts, not set on seeking God (not desiring Him foremost) and the satisfaction that he alone can bring, evidencing what Jesus said was the produce of the heart, “evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Matt. 15:19-20). Jesus’ half-brother, the apostle James, continued the argument against covetousness which lurked among the Christian community:

You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?

Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

(James 4:3-4)

Baker (2005) adds that thoughts matter because God is concerned with his people’s perfection, and notes how people, like the rich young rule in Luke 18:21, might deceive themselves and think themselves to be covenant-keepers when they are actually idolaters. God seeks true worshipers, not merely, “those who avoid gross sins against other human beings, but people who are pure in heart and mind (cf. Ps. 24:3-4; 51:6-10; Matt. 5:8; Rom. 12:2; Phil. 4:8)” (p. 22). At this juncture, one might ask how the tenth commandment leads back to the first and second commandments, for that it does is no unfounded musing. The apostle Paul writes: “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5). Similarly, Ephesians 3:5 says, “For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an

idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.” Again, Baker (2005) notes regarding the commandment,

The tenth moves from deeds and words to intentions: ‘Don’t even think about it!’ Coveting is indeed a serious offence...In fact, it is arguable that the tenth commandment is surpassed in theological and ethical importance only by the first...This attitude can be summed up as contentment with what God gives us rather than desiring those things he has given others...counter-cultural, and certainly not economically correct, but it is what the last commandment requires of those who aspire to perfection. (p. 24)

For God to allow anyone to covet without the assured threat of punishment would make God one to permit idolatry, and that would make God an idolater himself, for he would allow something other than God to receive the exaltation only God deserves, and such would give the impression that fuller joy can be found elsewhere, a lie that would deny his character and starve those hungry for his eternal life. Covetousness casts a powerful illusion and strikes a deadly blow, as Jesus warns his disciples, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15).

It should be clear: God does not tell his people to not do something prior to having explained and provided the proper motivation for what they ought to do. The following three passages illustrate as much.

1. But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead *let there be thanksgiving*. (Eph. 5:3-4)
2. Keep your life free from love of money, and *be content with what you have*, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” (Heb. 13:5)

3. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall *love your neighbor* as yourself.” (Rom. 13:9)

These commands provide a solid argument for how the desires of God’s follower ought to motivate him. First, God’s great salvific works on the follower’s behalf are more than enough to elicit his praise and thanksgiving. It is hard to imagine a man who understands his coming judgment and yet desires something more than a full pardon. Second, having received the reconciliation that only God can work on his behalf, the man receives nothing less than the free gift of *God* himself. Here God gives the greatest possible gift, and it is not simply pardon for sin. He gives himself for eternity as the gift. What more is there to desire when all that is desirable flows from one fountainhead of living water and he chooses not only to bestow his waters upon you to refresh you, but he also chooses to establish himself within you? This is unimaginably wonderful. Third, having received *all*, the All in all, to dwell within you, would it not be strange to desire something else – it would seem only those who do not grasp the gravity of this great transformation could even begin to trifle with other desires so puny and ephemeral, which are nothing compared to God. Thus, coveting is pitch-black evil. It is idolatry, exchanging the glory of God for some broken image (Rom. 1:23) falling infinitely short of the joy-giving full-glory of God (3:23). Coveting is illogical, suffocating, and diabolical. The follower of God has every reason to give thanks, to be content (lacking nothing!), and to love others out of the overflowing abundance welling up within him. To not do so would be the same as casting doubt on God’s trustworthiness – coveting like our forefather and foremother in the Garden. Thus, it is not wrong to desire things besides God; it is wrong to desire anything more than God, as if everlasting satisfaction originates elsewhere. Coveting is the manifestation of this wrong desiring in the

heart, and it is often evidenced in the absence of the three manifestations of the follower just mentioned: thanksgiving, contentment, and love.

What Are The Implications Of The 10th Commandment For The Contemporary Organizational Leader And The Organization?

If thanksgiving, contentment, and love mark one who seeks God first and does not abridge the tenth commandment, then the leader who evidences ungratefulness, discontentedness, and shows a disregard for others is breaking that commandment. Dent, Higgins, & Wharff (2005) confirm this as the disappointing norm in the modern day organizational environment, remarking:

Although the literature claims that [spiritual] leaders and their organizations espouse values such as love, harmony, unity, compassion, peace, truth, honesty, understanding, and tolerance in the workplace what they so often get instead is greed, cynicism, arrogance, impatience, self-doubt, envy, and moral decline” (p. 642).

Men’s coveting is to blame. Baker (2005), again, writes regarding the tenth commandment,

‘This fundamental commandment locates the source of all sinful forms of economic growth where they truly originate—the greed of individual hearts,’...whereas the nature of the covenant community requires that a member focus his or her attention not on self-fulfillment but on the worship of God and service of neighbor. (p. 23)

According to the Puritan preacher Thomas Watson (1692), covetousness infects and pollutes the whole soul just as it permeates the believing community. Surely, modern day organizations are no exception to escape the consequences of such community-poisoning

mindsets and motivations. Regarding what it means to covet, Watson identified characteristics, which would look like the following when adjusted for the contemporary organizational setting:

1. To think only of business matters: Are we growing? Have projections changed? Where are our competitors relocating? Etc.
2. To persist and persevere against great odds regularly, solely to get ahead in daily work, i.e. the motivation is to accomplish more work as an end rather than a means to a non-business end
3. To talk only about the working and planning of business matters. One's mind is singly occupied with the organization and matters affecting its business, and he is focused on keeping all conversation directed in this way
4. To give up anything required to get ahead in the business, including: people, peace, paradise, etc...The man would sacrifice personal rest, family responsibilities, community involvement, and more if he believed it led to greater organizational achievement
5. To take up a workload too great to allow for any rest in order to accomplish many goals. He engages too many projects to know what is going on in each and have a contributing role to play throughout.
6. To exercise any means, even illegal, to achieve goals. His motivation for such achievement is obviously not to evidence thanksgiving toward God, for one cannot achieve honorable ends through dishonorable means. (pp. 139-141).

A man so consumed is not going to such great lengths to evidence his satisfaction found in God, demonstrate how God meets his needs, or display the overflowing abundance of provision God has shown him through his reciprocal abundance of kindness and physical provision for those in his organization. This man is one who is likely stingy, for he is seriously concerned about the use

of resources, not for stewardship's sake; rather, he is concerned because he places no trust in God's favorable provision. He is like Cain who brings an offering to God in the course of time, if ever (Gen. 4:3). To give up first fruits or the best would be far too risky in his eyes. Thus, he will rarely use resources to boost followers' morale. And, he will comment upon the invalidity of human resource development, as he seeks to divert resources away from people-investment, which he probably views as organizational waste. He does not ask God for wisdom (James 1:5), and so he violates God's wisdom repeatedly by not showing generosity, or, if he shows some, it is never with his heart given to that person or group. He is the one Solomon warns against, writing, "he is like one who is inwardly calculating. 'Eat and drink!' he says to you, but his heart is not with you. You will vomit up the morsels that you have eaten, and waste your pleasant words" (Prov. 23:7-8).

This man strives for satisfaction in that which will not bring him contentedness. As the late leadership expert Calvin Miller (1995) wrote, "Great spiritual leaders do not stop us with their reputation, but with their devotion to His inescapable importance" (p. 16). In leadership, the man who covets not the Lord cannot be content, because his provision resides with his own strength. His self-reliance is his only hope, and so he is ever-anxious. Sleep flees from him, rising early and heading to bed late (Ps. 127:2), attempting to establish his own legacy. Many such leaders have not the means to build empires to themselves, and yet, they covet and contend for resources, worried that their subordinates may surpass them, worried that they might be let go, assuming all the while that resources are fixed and that they should scheme to limit their losses. As Cho & Fast (2012) explain, since, "denigrating others is a common form of ego defensiveness," "power holders appear to denigrate subordinates primarily when they feel insecure about their capacity to demonstrate competence," i.e. such discontent leaders lash out

when they lack the peace of God (pp. 778-781). They are incapable of showing gratitude, as they feel persistently disadvantaged. And, *that* does disadvantage them, for Kriger & Hanson (1999) identified thankfulness and peace (contentment) as two universal values which could help leaders in guiding organizations amid the dynamic global environment (p. 303). In describing the thankfulness component, they write: “Thankfulness creates the basis for healthy interpersonal relations by establishing norms of respect and positive regard for the needs and contributions of others” (p. 310). And, in regard to peace, they note, “Stillness and peace increase the likelihood that organizational members will be satisfied in belonging to the organization and decrease the likelihood of ‘burnout’” (p. 311).

When the covetous man finds a little success, he finds it pleasurable, though it is dangerous for him. Kerfoot (2010) points out how success can cause leaders like him trouble, as they may overestimate their contributions and take more credit for projects than they are due, subsequently underestimating the problems they cause (p. 350). Moreover, the drive to maintain success often pulls the entire organization off-course, derailing it from its mission, where their desire to succeed surpasses the desire to serve customers well, which is usually what generated the initial success. But, the love for others, which lay at the heart of customer service and the customer appreciation and caretaking that breeds successful ventures, is far from his mind and absent from his motivations. Moreover, Kerfoot (2010) points to the “toxic tandem,” which illustrates the development of leaders into self-absorbed, unconcerned, megalomaniacs whose followers respond by scrutinizing every move the leader makes and assuming the worst, thoroughly stunting the organization’s development (pp. 350-351). She argues, “it is imperative the leader continually give credit to others and take little credit for him/herself...Humility, gratitude, and appreciation will avoid the overconfidence that will lead to hubris” (p. 351).

Again, Miller (1995) remarked, “Stagnation comes from the receiving life...[whereas] personal growth comes from the giving life” (p. 13).

Conquering Coveting

There is no better antidote against coveting than which is another's than being content with that which is our own (Watson, 1692, p. 146).

Learning to be content is not a matter of self-denial in the way men often think or are taught by pseudo-religious gurus. It is not a matter of settling for less prestige or less acclaim. It is not a matter of telling one's self things he does not really believe in order to brainwash himself into thinking that less is more, that fasting is better than feasting, or that weakness is strength. The God of the Bible expects no one to believe falsehoods. Such is contrary to his nature. What he expects is for men to obey the truth – him. Receiving God as a Father and friend and Savior and Lord is not like a commercial where you expect there to be some greater “and,” to follow it up. In reality, men have not even scratched the surface of understanding the awesome gift of God's reconciling them to himself and his establishing loving relationship with them. As one probes this reality, the falsehoods he has held on to will begin to erupt in conflict and dissolve – if the man holds to the truth. The only proper response from the leader at this point is a sacrifice of praise. His contentedness in this way is not of a man who sits at a lonely bowl of porridge because that is all he needs as long as God is his God, as if he is strong enough to bear up under the handicap God has while evil runs amuck. That remains a perspective that devalues God and is blind to reality. True contentedness looks like a man who sees the world's desires as akin to garbage bins while God sets before him a banquet of delight. He says, “This is enough,” because there is no possible way he could manage to enjoy it all, even given eternity – which he shall

have. Again, this is not a matter of physical goods which can be stolen by men or decay (Matt. 6:19). It is a matter of truth, those words of life which are the bread of the living that come from God's mouth. There are powerful and exorbitant promises that God has made to motivate men. A man so motivated can surely give thanks with a grateful heart and be rejoicing in his contentedness that the treasures of God are just a fraction of his inheritance and the promise of everlasting peace his reward. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is wonderful, and he gives himself fully to the strengthening of those whose hearts are set on him. Thus, learning to be content, as a leader, is first about getting entirely new desires. God alone can so change a man's desires. Only then can one exercise those desires. Instead of trying to build self-significance through his organization or various other endeavors, leaders need to be continually reminded that God alone can fulfill men's hearts' desires, not with things, but with himself. Given the uncertainty in today's organizations and their environments, the best leader is the one so fixed in the truth he will not fall and so focused on God that he will not frighten. Such are the wise men who fear God in today's organizations (Eccles. 12:13). They covet God, and He never changes (Heb. 13:8).

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