

NINTH AND TENTH COMMANDMENTS

We read the Ninth and Tenth Commandments with explanation from the Small Catechism:

You shall not covet your neighbor's house. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God that we do not scheme to get our neighbor's inheritance or house or obtain it by a show of right, but do all we can to help him keep it.

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, workers, animals, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God that we do not force or entice away our neighbor's spouse, workers, or animals, but urge them to stay and do their duty.

We are taking the Ninth and Tenth Commandments together because they both deal with the same sin: covetousness, which is a sin of thought. What is covetousness? I think the easiest way to think of covetousness is to think of wanting what you either cannot or ought not have. Covetousness, in essence, is the birthing ground for all other sins. Lust, wanting another in a way God would not have us have them, leads to open sin against the Sixth Commandment as we do harm to another's marriage or dishonor his or her body, greed leads to sin against the Seventh as we do harm to our neighbor's property or possessions, and envy and pride to sin against the Eighth as we do harm to our neighbor's reputation.

Last week, we considered how dangerous the tongue can be—how hard it is to bridle, though but a tiny part of the body. This week, we see the same is true of the mind. How often don't our thoughts war against our faith, and how hard isn't it to chase them away and keep them from festering? Yet Christ has purchased and won not only our hearts and souls but our minds as well, and would have us love Him equally with our thoughts as with our affection and our deeds.

The human heart is by nature selfish, and the human mind by nature crafty, like the serpent who led our race into sin. And so we are good at putting beautiful motives on sinful actions, at dressing sinful desires in pious terms. But the Christian must always seek to strip off the charade, to expose the reality of the matter. Why do we do what we do? Why do we desire what we desire? If we cannot answer these questions honestly, or if we are uncomfortable even contemplating them, we do well to examine ourselves in light of these Commandments. God does not want whitewashed walls or jars clean on the outside but filthy within. God wants all of us, and God knows all of us, and there is no fooling Him, no hiding from Him in the deep recesses of our hearts or minds.

Covetousness does not only harm our neighbor and offend God, however. It also hurts us. It deprives us of the ability to enjoy the good things that God has given us. It robs us of the opportunity to treasure each day as the day that the Lord has made. When we are focused on others, we cannot rejoice in our standing in God's sight, and when we are infatuated with another's family or possessions, we cannot find satisfaction in our own. And so we lose, in addition to our neighbor, in addition to God.

What has God given to you? If you think about it, it is always more than you realize. How much don't we take for granted? How often don't we lose sight of what we do have as we obsess over what we don't? God is good, and your life is living breathing proof of that, as is the roof over your head, the clothing on your body, and the loved ones that hold you dear. And these things that He has gifted to you, these are the things that He delights to see you enjoy, for which He longs to receive your gratefulness, and nothing you try to replace them with will ever satisfy the covetousness that dwells within all of us. No, only Christ and the contentedness that comes through the peace we find in His wounds can fill that void, the knowledge that in Him who died for us to live we have everything and can lack nothing.

I've told before the story of how some trap monkeys in Africa. They put a shiny object in a jar. The monkey reaches in, takes hold of the prize, and then is unable to remove his hand. He could free himself if only he let go of the shiny but worthless piece of foil or metal in the jar, but his greed, his unwillingness to lose the desire of his eyes, is the death of him, as he is captured and clubbed.

When you think about it, we might be tempted to think, "Stupid monkeys." But let me tell you, it's not just monkeys. My own children have been caught in the same predicament, their arm stuck somewhere because they refused to let go of whatever it was that they were desperate to have. And not only my children have been caught in that predicament, but we have as well, whether physically or spiritually. For how often haven't we latched on to the desire of our eyes only to have it be our undoing, to have our unwillingness to let go of some sin or plan that didn't fit with God's bring us great loss or deep pain? And even worse, how often has the same also brought great loss or deep pain to our neighbor as well, whether our spouse, our children, our parents, our friends or other acquaintances.

St. Paul warns St. Timothy of the dangers of covetousness and the benefit of contentment in his first letter to his spiritual son in the faith, the sixth chapter:

Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

Contentment, however, is not something we're born with. Contentment, like salvation, is something we're given, and, like salvation, it is only found in the free gift of Christ.

St. Paul later wrote in the fourth chapter of his letter to the Philippians, who had sought to help in his hour of bitter need:

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

And isn't that really the case with all of the Christian life and with regard to all of God's Commandments. Left to our own devices, we are lost and damned. In Christ, however, we have a crucified Savior who gives us new life through the obedience of faith. And it is only in Him that we can serve God. It is only in Him that we can truly appreciate what we have and seek to use it for our neighbor. St. Paul says it himself. He may have know the secret of being content, but he had no secret power that we do not have. No, he writes, "*I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*"

We have that same Christ. We hold to that same Christ. We draw life and strength through the same Vine hanging on the same tree of the cross, the tree of life. May God grant our faith flower and fruit as we live as His branches, as His hearts, minds, and hands, in a world full of opportunities to love and serve God through our neighbor in the vocations in which He has set us, in the ways which He provides us, and with the gifts which He has given us. Amen.