

# The Ten Commandments for today

## 10. "Thou shalt not covet"

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**T**HIS COMMANDMENT is different from all the others. Perhaps that is why it comes last on the list, as if it has something to add to the nine which have gone before. With the possible exception of the first commandment, it is the only one which leaves no outward sign of having been broken. In every other case, an idol or a profaned sabbath or a wronged neighbour would provide evidence of an offender's guilt. But "Thou shalt not covet" is not like that; it is concerned with secret sin.

Here was a commandment which could never be legalistically side-stepped, as happened too often with some of the others. It addressed issues of the heart, so a token outward observance would never suffice. And it was designed to help ensure that the other nine commandments were never transgressed. If covetousness were avoided, God would never be deprived of His sabbath day observance, nor a mother of her honour, nor a man of his possessions, his good name or his life.

"Thou shalt not covet" therefore involves principles we associate more readily with life in Christ than with the Law of Moses. It is the Lord who teaches in Matthew 5:27,28 that the problem behind adultery is looking at a woman to lust after her. Do not *covet* a woman who is not yours, the Lord says. Be content with what your heavenly Father has given you, and you will not sin against Him. Lack of contentment can lead to immorality (Rom. 1:21), and guarding against immorality involves thankfulness for what we have (Eph. 5:4).

So there is good reason still for a child of God to tackle covetousness when he sees it in his heart. No doubt this is the reason for the record of Jesus' encounter with the rich young man. Like him, we might pride ourselves at not knowingly having broken any of the other commandments. "All these have I kept from my youth up", we might say too (Mt. 19:20), as the Lord points him directly towards the first nine commandments (vv. 17-19) as the standard to measure himself by on his quest for salvation. But something was lacking, and the man would have to unburden himself of all the possessions he valued if he was going to attain to perfection (v. 21).

For this young man, the heart of the problem was the problem of the heart, for he was covetous. It is the commandment which notably the Lord missed off the end of the list in verse 19. The man's external religious observance was faultless, but "Thou shalt not covet" presented him with a challenge he was not able to rise to. "You have deprived neither God nor man of their dues", Jesus is saying, "but I call you to something higher. Learn to lose all you have accumulated of this world's goods and yet be content; then come, follow me".

Because we know that the Law of Moses is not binding on us today, we can easily overlook the power of the principles it enshrines. In the case of the rich young man, the Lord spells out the lesson for us by *refraining* from mentioning the tenth commandment, thus making it conspicuous by its absence. When the Apostle Paul shares his experience of the effectiveness of the Law, in Romans 7, he does so by mentioning *only* this same commandment. His sins were not the fault of the Law, he explains; it was only the Law which could tell him what sin was (v. 7). But he picks the tenth commandment as his case study.

Like the rest of the Law of Moses, the Ten Commandments were not designed for anyone to prove their own righteousness by, but to help identify (and regulate) sin, and thereby to convince every man and woman of their dependence on the grace of God. And so good were the commandments at this, they could even point out sins which had never seen the light of day. In a striking parallel with what befell Eve in Eden, Paul realised that even "Thou shalt not covet" left him as good as dead, and we well remember his consequent turmoil in verses 15-24 because it so closely matches our own experiences.

Measured against the exacting standards of this last of the Ten Commandments, every one of us is guilty. Yet, having had even our secret sins exposed by the light of the Word of God, let us take comfort. For the God Who calls us to perfection has also freed us from condemnation in Christ Jesus His Son (8:1), and the godliness with contentment this motivates us to is of greater gain than all this world has to offer.