

One Nation Under Greed

Exodus 20:17

Introduction

It has really been fascinating, the moment I started studying on the particular command that we are going to discuss today, it seemed like I was confronted with covetous situations more than ever. In fact, I am so glad to be preaching this because we can get past it and get on to something else!

One of my favorite automobiles is the Volvo 760 GLE turbo. It is a great family car. It really is. Then, when the family is not with you, you have that turbo!

Now, my wife is out of town this weekend. She is at the wedding of one of her cousins. Before she left, a dear family called. My wife answered and they said, "Hey, I understand you're going to Atlanta. What are you going to drive?"

My wife said, "Well, you know, the Chrysler."

They said, "No. We just bought a brand new car. We want you to take that to Atlanta."

You can probably guess what the new car was. They pulled into the driveway in a brand new 1990 760 GLE Volvo turbo! My wife will not even appreciate it. That is the problem – she will not get a thing out of that eight speaker system and everything else. When they called, I thought, "Lord, this is not funny at all. It is only two days until I have to preach on this subject."

We are going to deal with a subject today that you may think is very anti-climatic in the list of the Ten Commandments. Yet, I believe this command knocks at our doors more than any other.

Turn in your Bible to Exodus, chapter 20. We are going to look at the subject of covetousness. A sister word to "covet" is "greed".

It is interesting that one company considered covetousness to be a solution to their problem. An American company, based in Panama, was having trouble with their employees quitting the job. It was an agrarian economy and society in which the people had very little money. When these people received their cash pay for a week of work from the company, they had more money than they had ever seen in their lives. They assumed that was all they would ever need and would often quit. So the executives put their heads together and thought of a way to keep them from quitting. They gave each employee a copy of a Sears catalog. These people saw things they had never dreamed of before. All of a sudden, they realized they needed more and the rate of employee turnover was incredibly reduced.

Now it may be a solution for that company, but it is a problem in the fact that it has invaded our culture and it invades our churches. Covetousness, or greediness, if you would prefer to call it that, is prevalent in our society. If you have been reading the newspapers for the past month, you have discovered that truth.

A United States attorney in New York, by the name of Giuliani, decided to create a sting operation. It was discovered that one hundred six public officials have been offered bribes. One hundred five accepted the bribe. The other one turned it down because it was not enough.

Covetousness pervades everything about our culture and our society. It is interesting, as we study these commands, that they are so relevant to today.

The Command Given

Look at the command, which is given in verse 17 of Exodus, chapter 20.

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 belongs to your neighbor.

Now, the word “covet,” is the Hebrew word “hamad,” which means, “to desire; to take pleasure in”. It is a neutral word. The New Testament counterpart of this word is “pleonexia,” which literally means, “a passion for possessing”. In other words, “I’ve got to have that.”

What makes coveting so hideous is the fact that you are coveting something that belongs to someone else. You see that object or that person that someone else has or has the right to, and you covet that thing or that person.

This command really gets to the point; it is not playing games. It says, “Don’t covet possessions. Don’t covet spouses. Don’t covet anything. Don’t take pleasure in pursuing possessions that are not rightfully yours.”

As I studied this passage this week, it is interesting that I think we could make a case that coveting begins or is built on a foundation of comparison. You look around and see something someone else has and think, “That’s better than what I have.”

Your car is fine, until a Volvo turbo pulls into the driveway. Your house is perfectly adequate, until you go to visit so-and-so and see what they have. The terrible thing about this is, your wife or husband is all right; perfectly acceptable, until you start comparing them with someone else’s wife or husband.

Comparing – we can joke and laugh about it, but we do it, don’t we? Ladies, you find out that Henry bought his wife flowers last week. Now the wife that got flowers, and women are great at this, is going to make sure that three or four of her friends find out. She is going to wait for an opportune moment, like when her friend calls her and says, “What are you cooking for supper?”

“I don’t know, but my husband just bought me flowers.”

The conversation really led into that! So that wife says to her husband, “Hey, Henry bought his wife flowers . . .” while thinking, “. . . now, when was the last time . . .?”

If the truth were known, Henry probably does not take the trash out when his wife asks. What do you want, wives, flowers or the trash taken out?

All the wives are saying, “Both! Both!”

I think this passage is probably a tremendous text for marriage itself, when it says,

You shall not covet your neighbor's . . . wife
. . .

You shall not covet your neighbor’s spouse. What does that mean? That is working through what God has given you.

Someone once wrote, “Marriage is like taking a plane trip to the Bahamas for a vacation. When the plane arrives, you get off and discover you are in the Swiss Alps. The ingredient that is necessary is learning how to ski.”

I love that. The healthy ingredient in every marriage – even though you may observe someone else’s and think, “Boy, that’s so much better.” – is that we have all discovered how to ski. So, in the process of discovering that, *stop* looking around and comparing.

Your marriage, your financial situation, whatever you have or do not have, God says directly through Moses, “Stop desiring possessions that do not belong to you.”

Two principles

Let me give two principles, before we move on.

This command is not prohibiting activity, but attitude

1. First, this command is not prohibiting activity, but attitude.

That is crucial to understand. It is an attitude that may lead to activity, but it is the attitude, not the activity, that is being condemned in this command.

This command is not prohibiting the overt act of the hand, but the inner secrets of the heart

2. The second principle is that this command is not prohibiting the overt act of the hand, but the inner secrets of the heart that no one knows about except you.

This command is addressing the struggle that no one but you would have a clue you are going through.

God says, “The inner recesses of your heart is the place where you covet; it is there that the battle is won. Do not, in the secrecy of your heart, covet.”

Do not covet persons.

We could translate this in today’s society, “Do not covet someone’s position.”

You might look around at your job and think, “That guy who just got promoted – I’m much more capable than he is. That promotion should have been given to me.”

So, what do you do? You do the same thing that all of us learned to do. Back in your middle and high school days, for instance, all who had to sit on the bench and watch the basketball team play have felt this way. I speak from experience, so maybe I should personalize this. I was second string and I still remember the player who was first string, named Doug Gates. I would watch the whole game and do you know what I was hoping? Do you think I was hoping that my team would win? No way. I was hoping Doug would break his leg so I could get in there and play. He had the position I wanted.

We still have situations like that today. People have positions and possessions that we want. Can we rejoice in what God has given them? Absolutely not.

Someone once said, “It is so easy to ‘weep with those who weep,’ but it is so difficult to ‘rejoice with those who rejoice.’” (Romans 12:15)

Why? Because we are covetous; we are greedy people.

I discovered something interesting recently. The apostle Paul, who took pride in his standing before the Law, said, in Romans, chapter 7, “I discovered, according to the Law, that I am dead.” He pulls one of the commands out, and guess which one it was that confronted him?

You shall not covet . . .

Paul then said, “I have been able to handle the other nine commands, but it is this one that lays me low.”

The Command Illustrated

Now, I want to illustrate and apply this command from the New Testament. So please turn to Luke, chapter 12, for an illustration and application of the sin of coveting.

Look at verse 13.

Someone in the crowd said to Him [Jesus], “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

It is interesting that he did not say, “Please,” or “I have a right to this,” but just, “Lord, You have authority. Tell him to divvy up the spoils.”

Continue to verses 14 and 15. Jesus replies to the man and then speaks to a crowd of unbelievers, including His disciples.

But He said to him, “Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbiter over you?” Then He said to them, “Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.”

The word “greed” in verse 15, is that Greek word “pleonexia,” meaning, “covetousness”.

Jesus then tells a parable to this crowd as an illustration of covetousness. Look at verses 16 and 17.

And He told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?’”

Three failures in a fool’s life

I want to give, from this passage, three failures in this fool’s life.

He failed to consider his neighbor

1. First, he failed to consider his neighbor.

You should underline the words, as I did as I read this passage, “I,” “me,” and “my”. Look at verses 17 through 19a.

And he began reasoning to himself, saying, “What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?” Then he said, “This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to

my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up'

Six times he says, "I". Five times he refers to himself by the words such as "me" and "my".

It is interesting that this individual who is wrapped up in coveting; who is wrapped up in the passion for possessing, is wrapped up in himself. It is the same for you and I, ladies and gentlemen, when we are wrapped up in coveting – guess what happens? We get wrapped up in ourselves.

If that battle is not conquered by the Spirit of God every time we walk out the front door, we develop lives centered around ourselves. Our thoughts are on what *we* want, where *we are* going, the position *we* want to have, the list of things *we* want, the amount of money *we* want to have in our bank account. Our words become, "I," "me," "my".

There was a very wealthy man. Wealth, by the way, is in of itself, neutral; it is how that wealth is handled that matters. This individual had a terrible disposition and was a very selfish man. He came to visit a Bible teacher. The Bible teacher recorded that visit.

The man said, "I have a lot of money and that may be very selfish, but I'm not really sure why."

The Bible teacher took him over to the window and said, "Look out. What do you see?"

The man looked out the window at the street below and said, "I see men, women, and children."

The Bible teacher then took the man by the arm and took him over to a mirror and asked, "Now what do you see?"

The man replied, "Now I see myself."

The teacher said, "In the mirror and in the window is glass. The only difference is that the glass of the mirror has been coated thinly on one side with a coat of silver. No sooner do you add the silver than you begin to see only yourself and not other people."

The tragedy of the man in this story is not that he was wealthy; the tragedy is that he was wrapped up in a very little package called "himself". He never saw anyone except, "I," "me," and "my".

That is one failure in this fool's life. He failed to consider his neighbor.

Paul writes to his son in the faith, in I Timothy, chapter 6, verse 10 (KJV), and says,

For the love of money . . .

(not money, but the *love* of money),

. . . is the root of all evil: . . .

(we usually stop at that point and forget that there is more to the verse),

. . . which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

Do you know what I think one of the chief sorrows of this error is, in relation to this scripture? Loneliness. I think an individual who is wrapped up in himself is a very lonely person because no one else can invade his life.

He failed to consider his neighbor.

He failed to recognize his own mortality

2. Secondly, he failed to recognize his own mortality.

Let us look at verses 19b through 20a of Luke, chapter 12. Take note of the words, "many years to come".

"Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your soul is required of you . . ."

I used to think that God was taking his life. That is not the case, however. God knew that the man would die that night. We are not told how he died, but God knew that his life would end that night. This man did not know. He said, "I have many years and I'm just going to settle back and spend it on myself."

Look at God's response in Verse 20.

But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?"

The tomb of Charlemagne, the great conqueror, was discovered and opened. To the shock of the archeologists, they found that Charlemagne had been positioned on his throne at his request. There was only his skeleton at the time of the discovery, but he was seated on a gold overlaid throne and was dressed in the finest that he had owned. His hand had been fixed on his knee, with his index finger pointing. They looked closer and discovered that Charlemagne, who was a believer, had woven into the fabric of his clothing material, Mark, chapter 8, verse 36. The

epitaph by which this world conqueror wanted to be remembered is,

For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?

Someone wrote, tongue-in-cheek, “Have you ever seen a hearse pulling a U-haul?”

No.

The point is, this man failed to recognize that he was mortal. There is a deceiving, obnoxious factor in people who possess and pursue things, that they are removed from accountability, especially to God. They are independent. They are very obnoxious because they fail to recognize that they are mere mortals.

He failed to acknowledge God

3. The third failure in this fool’s life is that he failed to acknowledge God.

Note the last part of this Luke, chapter 12, passage. In verse 21, God says of the fool,

So is the man [fool] who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.

There is a French artist who painted a very interesting piece. He read this passage of scripture and decided to put it on canvas in oil. So, he painted the picture of a man sitting at a desk. On the desk were bags of golden coins. Behind the desk, on a long shelf, were many more bags of golden coins. To the left was a window, through which, as far as the eye could see, were dark green fields – a bumper crop. The man was sitting at the desk with a rather smug look on his face.

When the artist finished, he did something unusual. He thought, “This doesn’t portray it right.”

So, he turned the canvas over and painted the same picture again – the same man, the same desk, the same bags of gold, the same bumper crop through the window. However, this time, the artist painted it all overlaid with a thin coat of dust. One more thing was also added – the shadowy figure of the death angel, with his hand on the man’s shoulder, leaning forward with his lips pursed, as if to say, “Fool.”

Ladies and gentlemen, the grave danger of coveting is that we become self-oriented – we only see *ourselves, our* things, what *we* want, and we fail to recognize our neighbor. We lose sight of the fact that at any moment, we could be standing before God; that

we are not immortal; that we will not live forever in this body. Those who are wrapped up in pursuing things, fail to recognize the sovereign God who waves His hands and, in effect, says, “Stop and look to Me.”

The Command Applied

Now, I want to apply the rest of this Luke, chapter 12, passage. This chapter is usually divided down the middle and that is not good because we take it out of context. The next verse, verse 22, to the end of the chapter deals with, what is basically termed, anxiety, and how to get over anxiousness. This passage has nothing to do with anxiety; it has everything to do with overcoming covetousness.

Look at verses 22 and 23. Jesus gets His disciples away from the crowd and basically says to them, “Now look, I want to give you the meat of what I just taught these people; I want to apply it.”

And He said to His disciples, “For this reason I say to you, do not worry about your life, as to what you will eat; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body than clothing.”

A test to determine materialism

As I read and re-read this passage, two questions began to form. It is as if Jesus Christ has just given the instruction and now, He pulls His disciples over and says, “Look, I want to give you a test. I want to see if you are materialistic. I want you to see, in yourselves, whether or not you are greedy; whether or not you are covetous.”

Jesus then gives the disciples some principles that I think, we can form into two questions. I challenge all of us to take the test right now. Are you ready?

What is more important to me – getting more financially or growing up spiritually?

1. Question number one, what is more important to me, getting more financially or growing up spiritually?

Look at verses 24 and 25,

Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; and they have no storeroom nor barn, and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds! And which

one of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life's span?

That last phrase could be translated, "eighteen inches to your height." Translators are not certain how to translate that one little word "span" or "life".

I really began to understand, better than I ever have before, someone being anxious about adding inches, when the illustration was given to me last week. My kids make great illustration books!

Our twin sons turned four this past week. On the morning of their birthday, one of my boys, Seth, woke up and began crying. I went to their room and said, "Hey pal, what's the problem?"

He said, "Today's my birthday."

I wondered, "Did he pick this up from his mother when she turned thirty? Why is he crying? Let's reserve that kind of behavior for when you hit that decade, or forty, or whatever it may be."

I said, "Well, yes, aren't you happy about that? You're four years old."

He said, "But I thought, when I was four, I'd be big!"

He thought he would wake up the next morning and would have sprouted about fifteen inches. It almost ruined his entire day.

What a great illustration of how we ought to live with our spiritual growth in mind. How passionate are we to grow up spiritually in the Lord? How often do we go to God and say, "Lord, whatever it takes, mature me in the faith."

That is the point in this passage.

Let us keep reading and you will see that Jesus refers to that mature growth. Look at verses 27 and 28.

Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; but I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass in the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, how much more will He clothe you? You men of little faith!

What is important – developing your faith or your financial portfolio? That is the point.

Jesus is saying, "I want to develop in you believers, faith in Me that supercedes any pursuit of anything. I want you to realize the fact that I can

mature you, if you will yield to Me and take your eyes off of the stuff and put them on Me."

So question number one is, what is more important to you – getting more financially or growing up spiritually?

What concerns me most – having money I can manage or having God manage me?

2. Question number two, what concerns me most, having money I can manage or having God manage me?

Look at verses 29 through 34.

And do not seek what you will eat and what you will drink, and do not keep worrying.

For all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek; but your Father knows that you need these things.

But seek His kingdom, and these things will be added to you.

Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom.

Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys.

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

What really turns our crank? Is it having money in our hands to spend or living with the attitude of placing ourselves in the hands of God? That is the point.

What do I give my time and my thought to? How much do I have to manage? I'm not eliminating the fact that you and I have to struggle to make ends meet, but does the thought ever occur to us that it is not just that? It is allowing God to manage our lives. That is the issue. It is pursuing, not *our* kingdom, but *His* kingdom, not *our* stuff, but the things that relate to glorifying and honoring God; seeking first *His* kingdom.

Now, admit it – weren't some of the best times and aren't some of the best times in your life when you have been financially in need and have to depend on God? We do not want it, but when we come

through it, we think, “Man, did I ever learn something about God.”

That is why Charles Spurgeon once wrote, “We are at our spiritual best when we are shipwrecked on the island of God’s sovereignty.”

Let us take inventory for a moment. Go back in time in your mind. When did God reveal His hand? Was it when you had money to manage or was it when He was managing you?

It is not hard for me to come up with a time of desperate need. My wife, Marsha, and I had been married for a week and a half and we found ourselves in the parking lot of a seminary in Detroit, Michigan. I had not even been accepted in the seminary; in fact, I had never been there. I was confident I could get in, not because of my grade point average, but because it was a small school and they were desperate for students! We lived in a half a dozen different places and were always looking for the cheapest place. I was a janitor, cleaning bathrooms, and my wife worked as a secretary. We were always looking for a cheaper place to live, so that we could continue to build my library and survive.

Our last move was to a home, if you could call it that, in the city limits of Detroit, across the railroad tracks and just a block or two away from the Fisher Body Plant. That was really a classy neighborhood to live in! It is a place where you would lock your doors as soon as the sun set and there was always a stench in the air. Marsha would dust every day because that Fisher Body Plant would shoot polluted air into the sky.

The guys that I went to school with, and we were very close because it was a very small school, had a habit of going to Grand Rapids. If you like books, you know that Grand Rapids is a paradise because that is where Baker Book House, Eerdmans, Zondervan, Kregel, and other well known Christian book publishers are located. You can go there and buy books for close to nothing. Kregel has a basement that is as large as an entire building, from which they sell old and used books, arranged by author. I have some of the greatest treasures that have been long out of print, written by spiritually great men. We would scrape together our pennies, get a

van, go in together for the gas, and drive two hours to Grand Rapids.

I will never forget the day I had about fifty dollars and I went to Baker Book House. In a matter of ten minutes, I had my arms full with that fifty dollars’ worth. As I was leaving, my eyes fell on a set that I had been coveting for a long time – *The Pulpit Commentary* – fifty-two leather bound volumes that would last longer than I would. I simply did not have any money, but my friend had a credit card. Those books cost a hundred and fifty dollars. That was the amount of our rent in that Detroit house, by the way. I thought all the way back to Detroit, “How am I going to tell Marsha? I’m history.”

I returned home and told Marsha about the books, and, bless her heart, she never complained. I got those books out of the boxes and was just sitting there looking at them, when the thought occurred to me that our rent was due and now, we did not have the money to rent.

Now, I am not justifying that purchase, so do not go out and do something crazy like that. However, that night we got a phone call from our landlord, who was a believer. He said, “Hey Stephen, this past month God has really been good to my wife and I. We don’t want you to pay the rent this month.”

My first thought was, “Man, I should have bought three hundred dollars worth of books! Oh ye of little faith.”

One of the most exciting times was that point of abandonment. Think back to such times in your life. You can get caught up in the here and now and in the things you are trying to get. Just stop; just hold it – *think!* What moments have been the most exciting spiritual moments in your life? Are they the times when you have had extra or the times when you have needed to depend on God? The times of dependence on God are the times when He has evidenced His hand. That is the point.

God says, “Don’t covet possessions, I’ll take care of you. Don’t pursue things, pursue Me; pursue My kingdom and I will take care of you.”

Ladies and gentlemen, it is time we stopped asking more from God and started asking more *of* God. Do not covet.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/18/1990 by Stephen Davey.

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