

The Ninth and Tenth Commandments

You Shall not Covet

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There exists within each of us a whole range of appetites or desires. We desire everything from food, security, and temporal goods, to affection, friendship, sexual union, and a sense of being loved and respected. In themselves these desires are good and they help protect and foster important aspects of ourselves. However, since the human race labors under the effects of original sin, our desires tend also to have an unruly dimension. Frequently we desire things beyond what we know is reasonable or just. This is what is meant by coveting. Coveting does not include momentary desires that occur to us and which we dismiss as being unreasonable or inappropriate. Rather, coveting involves the wilful entertaining of inappropriate or excessive desires.

The importance of self control

A significant truth about our desires and passions is that if we overindulge them they become more and more demanding and powerful in their influences over our conduct. Self control becomes increasingly difficult to those who are self indulgent. If we do not learn to temper our desires we quickly become dominated by them. *The alternative is clear: either man governs his passions and finds peace or he lets himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy..Man's dignity therefore requires him to act out of conscious and free choice...and not by blind impulses in himself...Man gains such dignity when, ridding himself from all slavery to the passions, he presses forward to his goal by freely choosing what is good...* (Catecism 2339). The ninth and tenth commandments remind us of our freedom and dignity and solemnly instruct us in the importance of self control in terms of our desires. The significance of this issue for our well-being and happiness is emphasized by the fact that two commandments are devoted to matters of covetousness. We shall look at them each in turn.

**The ninth commandment:
You shall not covet
your neighbor's wife.**

Much has already been said of the importance of sexual purity when we considered the sixth commandment. It is not necessary to repeat all that material here. In terms of the ninth commandment the essential call is for the individual by the grace of God to attain purity of heart. *The heart is the seat of moral personality...The struggle against carnal covetousness entails purifying the heart and practicing temperance* (Catechism 2517). To be pure in heart means that we have attuned our mind and heart to the demands of holiness. It means we have purified our desires so that we keep God's law not because we have to, but because



we want to.

This may seem difficult since our desires do not usually change in an instant. Just because we know that our heart desires things or persons in ways that are excessive or inappropriate does not make these desires disappear. Yet through consistent self discipline, custody of the eyes and the other senses, recourse to prayer and sacraments, all with the help of God's grace, the desires of our heart change. We begin to love what God loves.

What is sinful becomes less tempting and the thought of sin eventually becomes even abhorrent to us. By God's grace our hearts change so that we can sing, *Well I'm not what I want to be but I'm not what I used to be, What a wonderful change has come over me.*

The purification of our desires.

Clearly this change in our desires involves an increasing self-discipline. In terms of sexuality we must guard our eyes and ears from suggestive or obscene things. We must exercise discipline over our feelings and our imagination by refusing to consent to the impure thoughts and desires that tempt us. In addition we will avoid situations with particular individuals which we know are tempting and we will dress and conduct ourselves modestly. As we exercise such self-discipline we discover our freedom and grow in that freedom through God's grace. We will also discover that what we truly desire comes more and more into line with God's commandments and his will for us.

Consequences

Refusing to do these things and yielding to covetous sexual desires leads to unhappy, even tragic consequences. Consider the example of King David who coveted Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. He yielded to his covetous desires, slept with her and she became pregnant as a result. David, embarrassed at his predicament, contrived to have Uriah killed in order to have Bathsheba as his own and to hide his adulterous conduct. Yielding to covetous sexual desires does not always lead to such dramatic results but it never leads to good results or produces lasting happiness. Our own age has witnessed a considerable rebellion against the ninth commandment and we have had to reap the sad consequences we discussed when we considered the sixth commandment. The ninth commandment seeks to protect us from the dangers of unrestrained sexual desire. It also invites us to discover the freedom that God's grace will bring fully alive and the joy that purity of heart can bring.

**The Tenth Commandment:
You shall not covet
your neighbors goods.**

Since it is the last of the Ten Commandments, it is fitting that the tenth commandment flow from and complete many of the other commandments. It forbids coveting the goods of another, which is at the root of theft, robbery, and fraud, which the seventh commandment forbids. Coveting, or "lust of the eyes" as scripture calls it (1 Jn 2:16) many times leads to the violence and injustice forbidden by the fifth commandment. Likewise, greed, which is very closely tied to covetousness, originates in the idolatry prohibited by the first three commandments. This is because of the way that covetousness frequently leads to a kind of worship of material goods.

The tenth commandment also completes the ninth since coveting involves far more than sexual matters. The scriptures specify the wide scope of coveting: *You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.*" (Ex 20:17). The ninth commandment forbids coveting in regard to sexual desires. The tenth commandment forbids all other forms of coveting.

We should recall that coveting by definition involves the wilful entertaining of excessive or inappropriate desires. Thus, it is not wrong to desire the things we reasonably need. Clearly it is essential for our survival that we desire food, water, warmth and shelter. Love, affection, family, and work are also essential for us and it is proper that we desire and seek fulfillment in these areas. Even seemingly non-essential things like recreation and entertainment are in fact necessary ingredients in life and our desire for such things is an important aspect of every healthy person. So long as our desires for any of these things is not unreasonable and we do not seek to fulfill

them in inappropriate ways we can say that they are good, even holy aspects of the human person.

Greed.

The tenth commandment forbids greed and the desire to amass earthly goods without limit. It forbids avarice arising from a passion for riches and their attendant power. It also forbids the desire to commit injustice by harming our neighbor in his temporal goods (Catechism 2536).

Envy and jealousy.

The tenth commandment requires that envy [or jealousy] be banished from the human heart...Envy refers to the sadness at the sight of another's goods and the immoderate desire to acquire them for oneself, even unjustly. When it wishes grave harm to a neighbor it is a mortal sin. St. Augustine saw envy as "the diabolical sin: "From envy are born hatred, detraction, calumny, joy caused by the misfortune of a neighbor, and displeasure caused by his prosperity." (Catechism 2538-2539). In this context it is worth noting scripture's teaching, *Through the devil's envy, death entered the world.* (Wisdom 2:24).

The tenth commandment, like all the commandments calls us higher. It calls us to recognize the freedom and the healing which God offers us through his grace. For in terms of our passions and desires we can easily become enslaved. How easily we become inebriated with the things of this world and become trapped by the seemingly insatiable desire for more. One look at the credit card balances of many Americans reveals that we live beyond our means and have difficulty controlling our desires. In some cases individuals are unable or unwilling to delay gratifications. Others consider as essential, things which they could do without. The tenth commandment calls us away from the illusions of necessity and immediacy. We are summoned to a freedom which recognizes that we can discipline our desires and master our

passions so that we make sound, wise, and just decisions in acquiring and using the goods of this world.

What are our desires really saying?

As we master our passions and desires we also learn more clearly what they are truly saying to us. Fundamentally every desire represents a deeper longing for God who is the giver of every good gift. In the deepest part of our heart there is a song, *I'd rather have Jesus, then silver or gold.* The tragedy is that many become lost searching for happiness in the things of this world. This ends in frustration and emptiness for our deepest longings are infinite. The finite things of the world cannot fulfill the infinite longings of our heart. For this reason *Jesus enjoins his disciples to prefer him to everything and everyone, and bids them "renounce all that [they have]" for his sake and that of the Gospel.*[Lk 14:33]. *The precept of detachment from riches is obligatory for entrance into the Kingdom of heaven...The Lord grieves over the rich, because they find their consolation in the abundance of goods.*[Lk 6:24] *But blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.*"[Mat 5:2] (Catechism 2544, 2547).

In the end, the tenth commandment calls us away from idolatry of worldly things and to the worship of the one, true God just as did the first commandment. It also calls us to abandonment to the providence of God and to freedom from anxiety about tomorrow which fuels so much of our desires to hoard and control the things of this world. Finally, it summons us to a desire for the true happiness which frees us from attachment to the goods of this world. For, once we have authentically tasted the Lord and experienced how good he is, our desires for many other things quietly abate and covetousness melts away. *I heard my mother say, 'Give me Jesus. You may have all this world. Just give me Jesus.'*