

# **Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, The Ten Commandments, Session 11, Commandment 10 – Thou Shalt Not Covet**

This is Dr. Anthony J. Tommasino and his teaching on the Ten Commandments. This is session 11, Commandment 10 - Thou Shalt Not Covet.

So now we have come to the last of the Ten Commandments.

You shall not covet. Don't want stuff that belongs to other people. And I got to say, you know, this particular commandment gives me a little bit of a dilemma because, you know, if I were to ask, has anybody here ever coveted before, as I've done in both churches and classrooms, almost every hand in the room will go up and usually with a smile on their face.

Now, you know, if I had asked, Has anybody here committed adultery? I bet not one hand will go up, you know, though some people will probably look very sheepish. If I ask, how many people here have been murdered? Probably not a hand. But if I say, on the other hand, how many people here have coveted? Every hand will go up.

So the problem isn't getting people to admit that they have coveted. The problem really is getting people to care that they have coveted. So, what makes this commandment different? Out of all the Ten Commandments, this one is unique, not only unique among the Ten Commandments themselves, but unique really among all the law codes of the ancient Near East.

You look at the Ur-Namu Code, you look at Lagash, you look at the Middle Assyrian laws, you look at the Code of Hammurabi, none of them have anything about coveting. None of them. But here we do have a command that, first of all, is like the first four commandments, which have to do with our relationship with God.

Those also usually don't typically appear in other law codes, don't have any other gods, don't take the name of the Lord in vain, and all those kinds of things. They all have to do with our relationship with the Lord, and they show that this is more of a covenant agreement, a covenant between humanity and his people, rather than a set of law codes or a set of regulations per se. And this one, too, is also something which sets it apart from law codes, because really, when you get right down to it, you can't really call this a law.

How do you enforce something like this? There is no penalty here or anywhere in the Old Testament that you will find specifically for coveting. So, you know, you go through the book of Leviticus, you go through Numbers and Deuteronomy, you'll find

expansions on laws about murder, you'll find expansions on theft, you'll find expansions on false witness, that all tell us about the different kinds of penalties that are associated with violating those commandments. You won't find anything in the Torah that talks about the penalties for coveting.

You'll find, too, when you think about it, that this is kind of unenforceable, right? I've mentioned this before, way back at the beginning. How do you know if somebody is coveting? How can you prove it? Is there any way you could prove it in a court of law? Unless somebody has written a note saying, I desperately, desperately want my neighbor's house, you know? You can't really enforce this law. Rather, it requires that we police ourselves, that we determine whether we are coveting or not.

So what we see here with this commandment is we are going beyond our relationship with God, we are going beyond our relationship with the environment, as in the Sabbath day, we're going beyond our relationship with our neighbors, as far as their actions, their things, their spouse. Rather, now we are called to bring our own thoughts into captivity and commit the way we think to the Lord. Yeah! And in one way, this kind of covers any kind of thinking that we might think about that might be, you know, bad thinking.

It's thinking, as you might say. Yeah? Coveting is a bit controversial, once again, and here we have a difference of opinion among different denominations about where this commandment falls in the hierarchy and in the ordering of the list. Is this indeed the 10th commandment, or is it the 9th and the 10th commandment? Jewish, Orthodox, and most Protestants agree that this is number 10.

You shall not covet your neighbor's household, you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or a donkey, or anything else that is your neighbor's. Then we have the Catholics and the Lutherans, who are the odd folks out, the strange birds in this case. The first two commandments were combined in Catholic and Lutheran ordering, so you have no other gods and no images combined and treated as commandment number one.

So, in order to come up with 10 commandments, because Exodus 34 and Exodus, I believe, 31, and then Deuteronomy all tell us that there are 10 commandments, in order to come up with 10, you had to do something somewhere else. And what they do is they break down the commandment regarding coveting into two commandments. So number 9, you shall not covet your neighbor's wife.

Then number 10 becomes, you shall not covet your neighbor's house, etc., etc., etc., etc. Where do they get this from? Are they just going through and cutting things up willy-nilly? No, actually, Deuteronomy 5, as I've already mentioned, reorders the elements in that coveting commandment and puts the wife first and separates her, in a sense, from the possessions of the husband. Also, the Septuagint in Exodus 20

follows the order of Deuteronomy for some weird reason, very possibly just because we're looking at Deuteronomy, who knows? But then St. Augustine also divides the last commandment into two: don't covet your neighbor's wife, and then don't covet anything else that belongs to your neighbor.

So, Catholicism and then the Lutherans follow St. Augustine and those other sources in dividing this into two commandments. My personal opinion, I believe that the wife moved to the front of the in Deuteronomy because of the new context in which Deuteronomy is given, that there was unreflection, a sense that the wife should not be simply grouped together with things like, you know, oxen and mules and houses and things like that. There's a bit of a separation there, and I think that that is what Deuteronomy was trying to make clear, that we are not simply that a wife is not simply another possession.

So, let's unpack this a little bit, shall we? We could make a YouTube video about that, right? An unpacking video. Then we get thousands and thousands of views. The word covet hamad, basically means to desire, but it has a connotation that goes beyond just wanting something.

It seems in many, many cases in the Old Testament, and this is a little bit controversial, but I think it's pretty clear in many of the cases, it seems to imply an intention to take possession of something. Let me show you some examples. Micah 2:2, they covet fields and they seize them, and houses, and they take them away.

So, Micah uses the word covet here, and he says that when people covet, then they take. Psalm 68.16, why do you look with hatred, O many-peaked mountain, at the mountain that God coveted for his abode? Yes, where the Lord will dwell forever. So, God coveted Mount Zion.

God took Mount Zion. Isaiah 1:29, for you shall be ashamed of the oaks that you coveted. You shall blush at the gardens that you have chosen.

The people coveted the oaks for places of worship, and they took them for their places of worship. Job 20:20, because he knew no contentment in his belly, he will not let anything which he covets escape him. Once again, somebody covets something, and they take it.

So, coveting isn't just like a passing fancy saying, oh, my neighbor's got a new car. I wish I had a new car. It's more like, oh, my neighbor's got a new car.

I want his new car, and I will find some way to get it. Now, as long as we're looking at this, when we have to think about this list here, you know, you shall not covet your neighbor's household, and then it goes on and names all these things that you're not

supposed to covet. Why have they listed out these items in this particular case? In Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, the lists are similar, of course.

Exodus, house, wife, manservant, maidservant, ox, donkey, anything else. Clearly, anything else covers everything, right? So, what was the reason for spreading all this out here like this? Deuteronomy, wife, house, field, manservant, maidservant, ox, donkey, anything else, right? So, basically, the same list except we have switched the order, and we have brought in a field as well. Both lists, I believe, have a similar rhetorical purpose, and the idea here is to emphasize that all of the neighbor's household and property are verboten to you.

Yeah, and this was kind of a common sort of way of doing, of trying to emphasize a point back in ancient Near Eastern literature, is that if you really wanted to emphasize something, you don't use one word to say something, you can say it with three. You use more words to bring your point across a little more strongly, and that's kind of what they're doing. Clearly, they could have said, Don't covet anything that belongs to your neighbor, and it would have meant the same thing.

But instead, they have gone on, and they basically added all the things that might be part of the neighbor's household. And yes, I do think that house here doesn't necessarily refer to that physical structure, the building. I think that really the word house in the Old Testament, we see this quite a bit, where house can refer to, if it's a king, it can refer to a whole dynasty.

But many times, in many cases, it refers to pretty much all of those things that are associated with a human being. So essentially, the two lists are saying the same thing. Anything that is among your neighbor's possessions, or in his possession, you should not take.

Household comes first in Exodus, because the house is a metonymy for all those belongings, all those things that belong to a man. And then we list those various parts of his household, and then we conclude by saying, or anything else, of all that might belong to your neighbor. So, in a way, it kind of builds this envelope structure, where we start by saying household in a way of referring to everything that a man has.

And then we go through and we list out those things that are part of that household, the wife, the animals, the servants, etc, etc. And then we conclude, and by the way, if he has anything else, that too. Deuteronomy, I already mentioned that it probably moves wife first, etc, apart from the possessions.

Why are they adding a field in here? Well, you count 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, then anything else here, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, anything else. I believe that the field has been stuck in there just to bring the list up to 7. Why? Because they like 7. You know, if you're

trying to say everything that belongs to your neighbor, completeness is shown by using the number 7. It is the number of completions. So, throw the field in there and you've covered everything that could possibly be part of the neighbor's possessions.

Don't go wanting your neighbor's stuff with the intention of trying to possess it. In some ways, for many of us, this might be the most relevant commandment. And it is repeatedly reinforced, not only in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament as well.

Mark, chapter 7, verses 21 through 22, from within, out of the heart of men, by the way, this is Jesus, proceed all evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adultery, deeds of coveting, and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. Luke 12:15, and he said to them, Take care and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. Ephesians 5:5, for this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, so here Paul associates being covetous with being an idolater, somebody who is wanting so intensely something which belongs to somebody else, that in a sense it becomes like a god to him, it starts to dictate his actions, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

And then James 4:2, you desire and you do not have, so you murder, you covet, and you cannot obtain, so you fight and you quarrel. Okay, James, I think a little heavy on the hyperbole here maybe, you know, no, not everybody who wants something that belongs to somebody else is going to murder them to take it from them, and I'm not really sure how many of your readers were actually doing that, but I suppose you would probably know your congregation better than I would. Anyway, really, somebody might ask, wanting something that belongs to somebody else, how truly serious a crime is that? Well, to some extent, there's a reason this comes at the end of the Ten Commandments, because you don't do any direct injury to somebody else by one and their stuff.

But on the other hand, you probably do a whole lot of injury to yourself. As I say, everyone will admit that they covet, but does anybody really care? Well, in the Bible, the seriousness of covetousness is driven home by several stories that show that coveting is oftentimes what we might call the gateway sin, that some of the greatest falls in the Bible begin with coveting. And this is very clearly illustrated and, well, very clearly stated explicitly once again by our good buddy James.

James says, each person is tempted when their own covetousness drags them away. Now, most of your translations don't say covetousness here, but that's the word, *epithumios*. By the way, this is the same word that Jesus used about lusting after somebody in your heart, that desire to possess, which kind of implies an intention to take possession of.

And they are tempted when they are dragged away by their own covetousness and enticed. And then, when covetousness has conceived, it gives birth to sin. And sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

Isn't that a lovely little ironic juxtaposition there? It gives birth to death. I like that. If the seed of coveting is left unchecked, it can grow into a bitter harvest.

It can bring destruction and death in its wake. No story illustrates this better than the story of David and Bathsheba in the Old Testament. The story, oh, takes place, oh, about a thousand years before the birth of Jesus.

It's recorded in the book of 2 Samuel. David has secured his kingdom, and he's prospering, and it looks like everything is going well for him. And then he decides to sort of kick back and take it easy.

And so, while all of his armies are out conducting war, David is sitting at home in his palace. And one day, he happens to look out his palace window, and he sees a house down the way, and he sees on the roof of that house, a woman is bathing out on her roof. Now, there are all kinds of speculations about whether she knew that David was watching her, and all that kind of stuff.

You know, we don't have to go there, you know, because we can't really know, so why speculate? What we do know is that David was watching, and he shouldn't have been. He should have been leading his troops out there on the front lines. Instead, he's home being a peeping tom, creeping on this lady down the street.

So, he sends for one of his servants, and he asks the servant, Oh, who's that young lady down the street there? A really attractive one, who was out on her roof bathing. And his servants go and find out, and come back, and they say, Oh, that young lady is Bathsheba. She is the daughter of one of your officers, Uriah the Hittite.

And David thinks, oh, Uriah the Hittite, huh? He's out conducting my wars right now, doing my battling for me. Gee, that means she's home all alone, poor little thing. And David begins to covet.

He covets Bathsheba. And so, David has Bathsheba brought to the royal palace, because he is afflicted by that dread disease of kings, where they come to think that there is nothing that they desire that they can't have. And so, David, desiring Bathsheba, commits adultery.

Well, Bathsheba soon sends a message back that she is pregnant with David's child. And David thinks, wow, we've got to do something to try to cover this up. And so, he calls Uriah back from the battlefield, thinking that Uriah will go home after giving his report, as David asks him to do.

Uriah will go home and spend the night with his wife, and then she'll announce that she's pregnant, and everybody will assume the child was Uriah's, nobody's the wiser, because apparently they weren't very good at counting in those days. But anyway, Uriah comes to the palace, gives his report, and then refuses to go back home. He sleeps on the floor of the palace.

David gets him drunk, tries to send him home, still refuses to go back to his wife, because he says, I cannot bear the thought of being out here, enjoying the company of my wife, my king's men are out there in the field fighting and dying. Boy, David must have really felt like a heel at that point, after having enjoyed the company of Uriah's wife while his men were dying out there in the fields. And so, what does David do? David gives a message to one of his commanders.

You see, David knows that nobody but he and Uriah knows that Uriah didn't go home, so he sends a message with one of his generals and says, Put this man who has this message in the hardest part of the battle, and then abandon him. And sure enough, the general does as he's told, Uriah is killed in battle, and David takes Bathsheba as his wife. So, David has committed adultery and murder, but it all began with, of course, the sin of coveting.

Now, the happy ending of the story, David doesn't get away with it, because there was this prophet by the name of Nathan, who comes and confronts David with this wonderful little story about a man desiring the little ewe lamb of his neighbor, coveting it and taking it as his own. And David's righteous indignation is kindled, and he says, Any man who would do such a thing should die. And Nathan says, You, oh king, are the man.

Yeah, and David had nothing but trouble in his household ever after that. But it all began with him being where he wasn't supposed to be, looking at someone he wasn't supposed to be looking at, and desiring her. Now, that's a pretty extreme story, obviously, because a man's coveting basically led to the downfall of his royal line, really.

And coveting isn't necessarily going to be quite that bad for most of us. It isn't going to turn us typically into murderers, in spite of what James may say. Typically, coveting will possibly turn us into big debtors, but not usually into murderers.

Some people might steal. Some people might lie in order to fulfill their desires. But we don't have to, particularly not in modern America, the land of plenty, the land where we can have anything we want, right? If our neighbor shows up at work, and he's got some slick new cell phone with all kinds of features, I don't have to steal his cell phone.

I'll just go get one of my own, right, and pay it off every month for the next 10 years, yeah? If he gets a beautiful new car, I will just go and buy one of my own, and maybe see if I can one-up him somehow, you know? If we find ourselves attracted to our neighbor's spouse, well, you know, wait a while, and maybe they'll get divorced, you know? We don't have to take it to the next step. We don't have to lie or cheat or kill in order to fulfill our desires. So, again, we might ask, is it really all that bad to want stuff that other people have? Hmm.

Well, there is clearly a sense where we would be quite short-sighted if we did not acknowledge the fact that covetousness can do damage to us, even if we never act on it in untoward ways or in really sinful ways. The affluence that people enjoy today, particularly in America, means that we rarely have to experience the frustration of our desires. Generally speaking, most things that we would want, we can somehow or another get them.

And slick advertisers know this, and they encourage us to be greedy by parading before us a constant stream of newer and better and faster and just shinier gadgets to make us want stuff, and we get taken in. Now, a number of years ago, I caught a video. It was made back in the 1950s, and essentially it was about consumerism.

Nowadays, most people think of consumerism as a negative thing, but this public service video was essentially trying to tell us that consumerism is a good thing and a patriotic thing. It's a good thing to go out and buy and buy and buy and buy and buy, and that's how we can make our country great. And you think, well, you know, that was in 1950 and it was post-war and all that kind of thing.

Well, you might also think back, if you're old enough to remember, in the 2011 and after the 9-11 bombings, the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Twin Towers and other bombings that took place, but particularly the Twin Towers type thing, the question came up of what can we do? And the President of the United States told us that what we need to do is go out there and buy stuff, and that by doing that we would stimulate our economy. And similar messages came up after the COVID pandemic, that it was a responsibility of all Americans to get out there and buy things so that we could get the economy moving again. Color me cynical, but essentially what they're trying to do here is to encourage covetousness as a national policy.

Your government wants you to be greedy. We want you to have more stuff, to get more stuff, and of course, Wall Street wants you to want more stuff, and of course, the advertisers want you to respond to their advertisements, and we get taken in. I don't know if our appetites have turned us into a nation of adulterers and murderers, but you could certainly say that we have become something of a nation of gluttons.



Being an American, I can kind of pick on America a little bit here, but America is really kind of the poster child of gluttony, of covetousness. The United States of America comprises 4.2 percent of the world's population, but we consume over 30 percent of the world's goods. American consumption is driven by social media as well as by slick advertising that fuels consumer dissatisfaction.

Believe me, they know the buttons to push. They have done the research. They know how to make us covet.

Our government, our advertisers, our producers of goods are all conspiring to make us violate the 10th commandment, and you wonder who's pulling the strings behind all this. I suspect maybe Satan. Anyway, we think about people who have lots of stuff, and we call them privileged, and yet having lots of stuff doesn't make anyone really happy.

Remarkably enough, affluent teens report higher rates of depression, higher rates of anxiety, and higher rates of substance abuse than any other socioeconomic group of young Americans today. Who's having the most trouble? The rich kids, the ones who are getting all the stuff that their little hearts seem to desire. And why is it producing so much anxiety? Why is it producing so much depression? Because they're finding it's not fulfilling.

It is not meeting their needs. They are not becoming happy, and maybe somewhere deep down inside, they suspect that this is all a lie. A number of years ago, I saw a program on public television.

The CDC had investigated a widespread outbreak of, let's just say, a disease which is typically associated with sailors. But where did this outbreak take place? It took place in one of the wealthiest suburbs in the United States, a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia. In this documentary, reporters went from one palatial house to another, and they talked with parents, and they talked with kids, and over and over again, they heard the same story.

The kids had pretty much everything they wanted, but they barely knew their parents. They were being left alone, 12 and 13-year-old kids left alone at home for days at a time while mom and dad went on business trips or perhaps vacations or cruises. Meanwhile, you had a bunch of kids who were bored and managed to get into all kinds of mischief.

Well-to-do 14-year-old kids getting pregnant, addicted to hard drugs, committing suicide because their parents were more interested in keeping up with the neighbors and having the latest and the biggest and the best rather than devoting their attention to their kids. Coveting had caused them to sacrifice their children on an altar of prosperity. Let's talk about some of the personal effects of coveting.

Maybe you're starting to care. Maybe, maybe not. This affects other people, right? It doesn't affect us.

What does it do to a person? Let's think about this. If they're dreaming about owning their neighbor's car, if they're lusting after their neighbor's spouse, or even just longing for their cell phone, what does it do to a person? Well, first and foremost, envy. Envy might be the first thing that we experience.

Envy now, I would have to say, isn't always a bad thing because sometimes a little envy can inspire us to better ourselves. If we see that there is somebody who is doing well, and we envy them, and we would like to do well. If we see that somebody is doing good and we envy them, sometimes it can spur us on to improve ourselves, to become better people, and to become more productive.

So, envy isn't always bad, but on the other hand, it certainly can be a bad thing as well because it can make us restless and discontented. Envy can lead us to resentment. So, first we're thinking, gee, why do they have all that good stuff? I wish I had good stuff.

And then it goes from there to, well, gee, I work just as hard as they do. Why is it that they get the promotions? Why are they getting raises? You know, they must be doing something for someone that I'm not doing. Or, gee, how can a guy like that afford a car of that type? He must be doing something illegal.

We start to resent the people whom we envy. Mary's husband just took her on a cruise. My husband never takes me on a cruise.

I'm married to a loser. Resentment can poison relationships. And then resentment can move on even further, which can lead us to hatred.

Most of us know, of course, that hatred is condemned strongly by the Bible. Maybe the most dramatic example of this process in recent history comes from a young, frustrated artist who had dreams of wealth and fame that were continually eluding him. His heart burned with envy for some of the successful artists and businessmen that he had met, most of whom were Jewish.

And his resentment and his envy grew into a bitter anti-Semitism. I'm speaking, of course, about Adolf Hitler. So, what we should see here is that even if coveting does not lead us to steal or murder or to become, you know, a tyrant, it can be harmful.

Harmful to our world. It can be harmful to our children. It can be harmful to our relationship with our neighbors.

Coveting can also be harmful to our relationship with God, you know. Coveting breeds dissatisfaction with the good things that God has given to us. We got a phone.

Oh, we're so happy. We've got a cell phone until we see our neighbor's cell phone. Oh, they've got such a better cell phone.

Why can't I have a better cell phone? No? And so we begin to despise those good things that God has given to us. And when we have that sense of dissatisfaction, when we're wanting things that have not been granted to us, then maybe we can start to resent the great giver. What you're doing, God, is just not fair.

There are a lot of really bad people who are really, really rich, and this just isn't right. Yeah, we can come to despise the wonderful things that we do have. Covetousness can drive a wedge between human beings and their creator.

Should we care about that? Oh, yeah, of course we should care about that. This is not a minor thing we're talking about here. God calls us to have a thankful heart.

You know, thankfulness is really kind of the opposite of covetousness. Covetousness is being dissatisfied and wanting those things that others have. Thankfulness is appreciating the things that you do have.

And that is the attitude that God calls us to develop instead of that attitude of covetousness. We are to become a people who appreciate our household, who appreciate our wives or husbands, and those people who do things for us, and those things that we have that can make our lives easier and better, and not keep thinking about all those things that we don't have, and all those things that we wish we had, and particularly those things that our neighbors might have. Let your neighbors take care of themselves.

So, I want to go back one last time to that question that we kind of raised way back at the very beginning. Are we obligated to keep the Ten Commandments? Are we freed from the yoke of the law? Well, in a sense, but on the other hand, if we look at the way that Jesus used the Ten Commandments, if we look at the way that the New Testament talks about the Ten Commandments and the principles behind them, we find that the principles behind these commandments not only are a good idea, not only do they help us to be the kind of people who are useful to the Kingdom of God, they are also the kind of principles that can help us to enjoy life and to be happy. And so, we could say, we are not obligated to keep the Ten Commandments, but we will be benefited and blessed if we do try to keep the Ten Commandments, because God gave them not as a burden, but as a gift to his people to encapsulate his relationship with them.

Let's not put them on a shelf or even put them on the wall of a public school and think that they're going to protect kids from bullets. That's not what they were made for. They were made to help us to grow in our relationship with God.

And that's the end to which we should be putting them.

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