

Do Not Covet: The Last Commandment

Genesis 3:1-7

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Adam and Eve were given a commandment, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.” Eve knows this commandment so well that she can recite it verbatim to the serpent. This commandment is the first boundary recorded in the Holy Scriptures, the first time God has set a limit. The limit is not about the fruit, but it is about the relationship. With this boundary, Adam and Eve will have to decide if they will submit to a relationship with God where there are limits, where God is ultimately in control, and where they must value God more than any other object of their desire. Ultimately, the commandment placed upon humanity is about coveting—desiring things that are of less value more than our relationship with God. This first commandment is placed in the third chapter of the first book of the Bible, as though to warn the descendants of Adam and Eve that this commandment will be our greatest challenge and the biggest threat we face in our quest to love God and follow God’s son.

And so it should come as no surprise that the final commandment in the list on the tablets given on Mount Sinai to Moses and the Israelites is this same commandment. It says you shall respect boundaries, you shall respect God’s authority, you shall honor your relationship with the divine, you shall love your neighbors; in sum, you shall not covet. Exodus 20:17 says, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” This is the final commandment, and Walter Brueggemann in his book *Money and Possessions* feels that in this commandment, God saved the best for last, the hardest, and the “sharpest zinger.”¹

Coveting is about the desires that get the best of us. Desire is what drives the human race—the desire to succeed, the desire to possess, the desire to love, the desire to create. The American psyche is a combination of ambition and hard work. By and large, we are people who strive to better ourselves and our families. We are also competitive, and so “keeping up with the Joneses” is a real driving force in our society. Desires and ambition and competition in and of themselves are not the problem. The problem comes when our desires confuse us, seduce us, and corrupt us. Our attitudes become warped by our uncontrolled desires—we want, and so we take. This is why God has given us a boundary, so that we are protected from the seductive and corrupting power of our own desires. Brueggemann writes, “This tenth commandment refers to an originary attitude of desire, of being propelled in ways we do not understand to desire what is not properly our own, so that desire becomes a powerful, seductive force that skews one’s life. The commandment suggests that it is the stuff that the neighbor has (wife, house, anything) that evokes the seductive energy of desire.”²

The marketing industry knows the power of these desires, and they are hugely successful in getting us to covet things we do not have—the bigger house, the faster car, and the latest gadget. Our desires are not limited to material goods; we desire the

corner office, we desire the perfect marriage, we desire the sculpted body. Big houses, fast cars, and fun gadgets are not the problem. Corner offices, perfect marriages, and sculpted bodies are not the problem. The problem is the way our desires for these things have the ability to take the place of utmost priority in our lives, a place that we have been told is reserved for God alone. Saint Augustine recognized our true desire for God is distorted by our desire for lesser objects.³ The time and energy we should be spending striving after God is spent coveting things of far less importance. The corner office will not bring you peace. The fast car will not get you to heaven. The new gadget will not offer you salvation. These things feel important, and yet ultimately, they are not. If they are not of ultimate importance, then they must not hold the kind of power over us which makes us willing to sacrifice our relationship with God or our relationships with one another to get them. Nothing should have more power than to love God and to love neighbor—with nothing outranking those chief ends—not money, not status, not power, not any worldly good.

Lent is the time of year when we think about things that are roadblocks in our lives of Christian discipleship. We ask ourselves, “What is preventing me from following Jesus with heart and mind and soul and strength?” We give things up or take things on in order to try to redirect ourselves towards God. In this holy season, we can use the tenth and final commandment, “do not covet,” as a way to take stock of our faith and our relationships. We should look to see what we desire and evaluate whether it might fall into the category of a “forbidden fruit” or a “neighbor’s house, or wife, or ox.” And then we should ask ourselves pointed questions: Are our desires leading us into deeper relationship with God and with our neighbors, or are they damaging our relationship with God and driving us away from one another? In the case of Adam and Eve, their desire to eat the fruit and thereby gain knowledge seriously damaged their relationship with God. This was the sin. In Lent, we examine our sins, we confess our sins, and we strive to turn away from our sin. In Lent, we are called to turn away from our covetous ways.

Thankfully, there is a biblical solution for repairing the damage that our coveting has done to our relationship with God. The solution is the Sabbath. Theologian Miroslav Volf once described a conversation where a rabbi helped redefine his understanding of Sabbath.⁴ Volf admitted to always having thought of Sabbath as rest. This definition left him often feeling like he was failing at keeping this commandment; resting for a day was admittedly rather hard. The rabbi said that the Sabbath is not a mere rest day but rather a day to “cease from striving.” Sabbath was the day to celebrate the life you already have, a day when we can stop our endless pursuit of bigger, better, more. Sabbath was the day the Israelites were not allowed to store up food, but had to eat and enjoy what they had gathered throughout the week. Brueggemann writes, “Sabbath is a refusal of the rat race of commodity acquisition; coveting is in contradiction to the alternative of Sabbath. Or better, Sabbath is the alternative to coveting.”⁵ For six days a week, we strive, we earn, we create, we pursue, but on the seventh day we say, “It is enough.” To keep the Sabbath means you must lean into the promise of God’s abundance⁶ and God’s provision. It takes faith and trust to keep the Sabbath.

In 2010, I was living in London when a volcano in Iceland erupted and effectively shut down the European Airspace. Heathrow and Gatwick airports were closed for days, as the ash in the sky was too dangerous for the planes’ engines. Living along the flight path meant I had grown accustomed to the constant air traffic noise. I never

set an alarm clock because the first flight arriving to Heathrow every morning woke me up. But because of the volcano, for over a week, there was an eerie stillness in the air. Business travelers were stuck, either at home unable to get to meetings or abroad unable to get home. After the first 48 hours of frustrations, people seemed to settle into the notion that they were stuck, and there was nothing they could do about it. They had to visit the museums in London, something their usual schedule would never allow. Or they had to spend time with colleagues and accept the hospitality of strangers. They had to simply stop and wait and rest, knowing that soon enough, they would be back to their work and back to their striving.

I remember when the first plane arrived at Heathrow. The noise seemed almost thunderous—far louder than anything I remembered before. When we keep the Sabbath, we shut out the noise of the hustle and bustle of life, the noise of the advertisements and marketing schemes, the noise of our own inner monologues of striving and desiring and coveting. In the Sabbath, we silence these things so that we might listen for God.

Lent is the season to attune our ears once more, that we might realize the power of our desires and the sins that have corrupted our attitudes and our relationships. In Lent, we are called to honor the Sabbath so that we might honor our God and affirm the psalmists refrain, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

Notes

1 Walter Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 15.

2 Ibid., 16.

3 Ibid.

4 M. Volf, personal communication, February 6th, 2016.

5 Walter Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions*, 23.

6 Ibid.