

Determination to Give Thanks

Series: Requirements for Humanity

by Steve Zeisler

In an interview last week, Ted Turner, in his usual bombastic style, pronounced himself a "news king." He proceeded to issue ten commandments that would be valid for contemporary society. In deciding that we needed new commandments (about the environment and population control, etc.), he said this about the original ten, "We're living with outmoded rules. The rules we're living under are the Ten Commandments, and I bet nobody here even pays much attention to 'em because they're too old. When Moses went up on the mountain there were no nuclear weapons, there was no poverty. Today the commandments wouldn't go over. Nobody around likes to be commanded."

It seems to me that the problem with the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses is not that they are too old, but that they are too clear and penetrating. The issues of parenting, honesty, theft, adultery, and idolatry have not ceased to be important for men and women of our day to consider. We are not dealing with ancient literature generated from human experience that is useful for only a generation or two. Rather, we have God-given laws which will never pass away.

Everlasting Commandments

For those scholars who think their job is to leave God out of Bible scholarship, the tenth commandment has always been difficult. It does not seem to fit with the other nine. The difference is that the commandment is not addressed to a behavior that any observer can detect. The tenth commandment, simply stated, is: "Do not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor." Coveting means to long for, desire, or "pant after" that which belongs to another. The problem with that commandment, of course, is that a person could break it every day of his life and nobody except God would know it.

The tenth commandment is addressed to the mind of the individual and speaks of God's concern that righteousness should begin on the inside. It is evidence that what we think is as important to God as what we do. People like Ted Turner misconstrue the Ten Commandments because they think that these laws were man-made rules generated to civilize an ancient people, but are not relevant to contemporary times. In truth, however, they are the concerns of God, not the wisdom of a brilliant tribe of ancient wanderers who needed legal boundaries to hold them together. This is not human genius civilizing itself by building barriers. This is God saying what matters to him. Thus, the concern of the Ten Commandments is not that we become more civilized, but more righteous. Moreover, if righteousness is the concern of God, the tenth commandment helps us see that the other commandments are addressed to our hearts and minds as well. We will never make progress by controlling our outward behavior. Without an answer to the desperate wickedness and rebellion that begins in mankind's heart, we will never become what God intended us to be.

Coveting at Candlestick

My daughter and I were among the 62,000 people at Candlestick Park on October 17 when the earthquake hit the Bay Area. It was an interesting setting at 5:03 p.m., one minute before the earthquake. The stadium was beautifully

decorated; the Goodyear blimp was overhead, broadcasting beautiful views of the city at twilight onto the big stadium scoreboard screen. With our binoculars, we could see the rich and famous in the luxury boxes that ring the field. These were the same people who had driven up in limousines to the preferred parking areas, while we had been shuttled off to the dirt parking lots far away. Looking down on the field we could see the players. I would occasionally find myself thinking, "What a great way to live. I wish I were in that kind of shape. I wish I had those capabilities."

The attention of the nation and the world was focused there, and the opportunity for coveting was everywhere. At 5:04 p.m., almost none of that remained, however. When it became clear how serious and destructive the earthquake had been, a hush fell over us. Many shifted their gaze from the field we looked down on to the heavens above us. Prayers for safety of loved ones replaced a desire for the best seats in the house.

I have since spoken to a number of people who have come for counseling after the quake saying, "I was scared to death. I need to get my life right with God." The money, the expensive car, or position at work that they longed for is nowhere as significant as it had been before. Rather, their focus is now on what God thinks of them, because life is in the balance. Coveting fills our thoughts with petty desires for that which belongs to another and keeps us from grateful acknowledgment of the power and mercy of God. An earthquake can, for a time at least, help us see that pettiness for what it is.

In the New Testament, the word that translates the Hebrew word for coveting is the Greek word *epithumia*. It is most often rendered in English as "lust." It is a panting, passion for something that is inappropriate, something that is not ours. I want to suggest to you that the opposite of coveting is thankfulness. By allowing God to change us from the inside we will be led into a living knowledge and appreciation of him. It is then that the yearning to have what is not ours can be replaced with a grateful and thankful heart.

Exposing a Sin-Filled Heart

Previously, I said that God is concerned first with our thoughts since they, more clearly than our behavior, tell the truth about who we are. In Romans seven, the apostle Paul reveals the rebellion in man through an examination of himself and his own struggle to know God. At a time when he was a proud, high-minded, pharisaical Jew, he ran smack into the tenth commandment, and was rendered undone by what he read. Romans 7:7-8:

I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind.

Paul is saying that he was pleased with himself. His life was going as it should, he was better than everyone else around him. He restrained his behavior, and did what he was supposed to do. In Philippians, he observed, "As to righteousness which is before the Law I was found blameless." Paul did everything he was supposed to do, but then he began to understand the call of God that his thinking should be pure.

When he heard the word "Don't covet," he addressed his mind and said, "There is a little bit of coveting cluttered around in there," and he decided to stop it. Instead of stopping his coveting, however, he found himself coveting more. Lust for the property of another that had never occurred to him before began to dominate him. The horror for Paul was that he realized that he had a disease of the heart. The Law told him what not to do, and it became the very thing which made him want to do what was wrong. Unable to control it, the coveting grew and ruled his thinking. He said, "The very commandment which promised life proved to be death for me." (Rom.7:10).

The Law Stirs up Sin

You probably have had similar experiences; not really wanting to do something until you were told you could not do it. I remember when cars first came with beepers that reminded us to put on our seat belts. I had no problem putting on my seat belt until my car started yelling at me to do so. The last thing I wanted to do was buckle up if the car was going to buzz until I did. I did not want my car telling me what to do, even though I agree with the use of seat belts in principle.

The diet industry has gone through a similar revolution. A decade ago, a published diet would have a list of foods that were prohibited. Although previously there may have been no interest in some things on that list, when you are forbidden to eat them, they become tantalizing. Now, most successful diet companies are upbeat and positive in their approach. They publish lists of "do's" instead of "don'ts." The focus is off the requirement that one should be forbidden something, because what rises up instinctively is a rebellious nature that refuses to go along with a rule. Recently, Congress passed a law against burning flags. At the stroke of midnight on the day the law went into effect, a group of people from the anti-war era in this country gathered as many flags as they could find and burned them on the spot. They had no intentions of burning flags until they were forbidden to do so.

Paul said the law forbidding coveting not only exposed coveting that had already been there, but stirred up a tremendous rebellion in him. He could not stop the lusting and envy for another's wherewithal. He could not stop the comparisons. He could not stop the thanklessness. "Sin came alive and I died." (Rom.7:9).

We are foolish if we think that God only cares about our observable behavior. We can restrain ourselves to some extent so that we appear to be someone different than who we are on the inside. Unlike man, God cares what goes on inside of us, not just outside. The peculiar tenth commandment which is unenforceable by legal means tells us of a God who is interested in not just civilizing us but making us into a righteous people.

The Process of Sin

Romans 7 points out that the Law actually stirs up sin. The apostle James says that the process of sinful thought leads to actions, which leads to death. The progression is the most natural thing in human experience. James 1:13-15 says:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God;" for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust [epithumia, coveting]. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.

First of all, we give way in our minds through temptation. We inwardly embrace the sin and placate it. That gives birth to action, resulting in death. Our thoughts lead to actions, which lead to consequences. I am sure you have experienced that time and again.

I remember once being furious with somebody I cared about, and I gave way to anger and resentment towards him. I would periodically carry on a drama in my head where I rehearsed venomous speeches that would tear the person to shreds. I never intended to say the words until I was provoked one time in the worst possible setting, and the whole diatribe came out. I had thought about it, given way and played with it by refining the speech. Although I knew how much it would hurt the other person, my feelings spewed out when I was provoked. The relationship has never been the same.

I thought all along I could control the thoughts, but instead I tore at my friend, and the result was distance and pain. I was not wise enough to understand James' words. The process does not stop so easily in the mind; one thing leads to the other. That is why God is concerned with our thoughts and addresses the tenth commandment to the inappropriate desire of longing for something that belongs to another. As James says, "After desire is conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is full-grown it gives birth to death."

The story of King David's sin makes this point (1 Sam.11-12). When he should have been fighting a war with his troops, he was indulging himself at home. He looked at Bathsheba, a woman whom he had no business being interested in. He coveted another man's wife. The coveting led to adultery, and the adultery led to death. Uriah was killed; the baby died. Later, other sons, Ammon and Absalom, died because of David's sin. The nation suffered revolution, as sin continued to bring forth death.

Likewise, King Ahab coveted Naboth's field. Through the urging of Jezebel, his wicked wife, he committed perjury in a public court against Naboth so he could acquire the land after Naboth's execution. Coveting, perjury, and death. Finally, the prophet Elijah went to Ahab and was told: Say this to Ahab: "This is what the Lord says, 'Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?' Then say to him, 'This is what the Lord says, "In the place where the dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood, yes yours'" (1 Kings 21:19).

As a consequence of his coveting, Ahab's life was forfeit and his children were cut off from ruling in Israel. James' understanding of the results of our thought process is incontrovertible in our experience.

Paul saw his rebellious nature in a new light by trying to grab hold of impure, covetous thoughts. James recognized that once those evil thoughts are implanted they have a tendency to lead towards actions which result in death. Ted Turner can say that the Ten Commandments are outmoded, but it does not refute the fact that God has said that he wants our thinking process for himself so that we might be righteous on the inside. If we do not begin, then we will not proceed anywhere.

The Tenth Commandment

Exodus 20:17 is one of two places in which the tenth commandment is found, and it says: You shall not covet [lust for, inordinately desire] your neighbor's household; 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.

Some things that we might covet that belong to another are his relationships—his family, his wife, and their children. We might long to supplant someone in the affections of a wife or husband, long to have the home and family that they have. It could be the means of production that an individual has, either his ox which plows his field, or the servants that work for him. We may covet his ability to generate wealth, to take those and own them for ourselves. We can covet someone's wealth, the things he owns. There are all manner of things that belong to our neighbor, the desire for which can eat us alive and destroy us.

1. Coveting is Competitive

I would like to make some observations about the law that forbids coveting. First, coveting is always competitive. You can see someone who has been blessed with a happy family or someone who is successful in business, and you can rejoice with them. Scripture says that when God does something good for one in the Body of Christ, all rejoice with

him. You can be delighted in the benefit of another, and even tell the Lord that you would like to be married and have a family like your friend. You can desire to learn the skills that he has so that you could be effective in life. You can appreciate the platform for service that the lovely home of your neighbor affords. It is not wrong to make requests for such blessings for oneself ("let your requests be made known to God," Phil.4:6). Covetousness comes in, however, when you want to take what your neighbor has for yourself. It is competitive. You not only want to add to yourself by having what he has, but you want to reduce him by depriving him.

2. Rejects God's Wisdom

Secondly, coveting is a deliberate rejection of the wisdom of God. When we covet, we are saying to God that we know what would make us happy and serve us better than he does. We are rejecting his provision for us as insufficient, and thus are ungrateful. As we focus on what has not been given to us, we shake our fist at God. I have known people who have seen their own family life disintegrate precisely because they had envied and coveted what another had. Envy was so blinding that their own wife and children were ignored and they lost the benefit of what was in front of them.

The story of Ruth in the Old Testament tells of a relationship between Ruth, a Moabitess, and her mother-in-law Naomi, a frustrated woman who was bereft of husband, sons, and her wealth. Ruth remained with Naomi despite many hardships. When she married into the family of Boaz and had a son, Ruth presented Naomi with a grandson. The women of the village came to Naomi and said in effect, "Naomi, you fool. All along you were mad at God for what you did not have. You wanted a husband and sons, and yet you had this woman living in your home who is better to you than seven sons. God met your needs by providing Ruth, but you undervalued her the whole time." God gives us good gifts. It is our business to be grateful for what we have instead of focusing on what we do not have.

3. The Loss of Hope

Thirdly, coveting destroys hope. Instead of working to bring about whatever changes we might well make in our situation, we become poisoned by coveting what we do not have. Instead of hopefully adventuring out into life to see what God has in store for us, coveting produces a dark hole of self-pity. There is no energy left to succeed because we are consumed with what we lack.

4. The Impossibility of Satisfaction

Finally, a covetous person is never satisfied. It is awful to covet something, manipulate it from one who owns it, only to realize that you are still desperately unhappy. Ray Stedman has called this "destination sickness"—getting what you want and discovering it to be unsatisfying. When a covetous man or woman achieves what is initially desired, bigger goals must be set in the quest for happiness. Sadly, the unhappiness will just extend itself because it is a disease of the heart, not of circumstances.

As I said before, the antithesis of coveting is thanksgiving. The work of God which takes away evil desires, rebellious thoughts, and self-centeredness produces in us thanksgiving, contentment, and appreciation for what we have. The apostle Paul says that we are to take every thought captive. Our thought life should be given over to the Lord to become his. In order to refuse the covetings of the flesh, we must walk by the Spirit. Rebellion must be replaced with the Spirit of God himself, taking up his strength and trusting him to do what we cannot do for ourselves. We will then become grateful for what we have.

Content in Everything

Philippians 4:11-13 says:

Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

It is Christ himself who will strengthen us. It is only in him that we have the power to overturn the rebellion, to live with thanksgiving. The word is contentment in this passage. How do you know whether or not you are content? The way to measure contentment is to find how regularly and naturally you speak a word of thanks to God. Does it come easy for you to appreciate him? Do you look at your world and say "Thank you, Lord" without having it strained and pressed out of you? To end the study of the Ten Commandments here could not be more appropriate. All of our concerns for behavior, the destitution of our culture, the loss of family life, and the idolatry of the worshipers of mammon comes back to this question. There has to be a change of our hearts. We need freedom from the rebellion described in Romans seven. What frees us is the presence of God, embraced by faith, the strength of one stronger than us. In him, we can be grateful, content in every circumstance.

When we take communion we have the opportunity to share together in the Lord's table. We can either focus on what we do not have and be resentful, angry, and covetous, or we can focus on what we do have. If you are a Christian, what you have is Jesus Christ. He has given his life for us, and the most tangible evidence we have is the invitation to eat this meal so that we might ingest him and live by means of him. We can throw our hearts open and say thank you to God for what we have, or we can continue to bristle at what we lack. I urge you to allow the Lord God to teach you gratitude, that you would rejoice in the greatest gift of all.

Catalog No. 4188
Exodus 20:17
Ninth Message
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October 29, 1988
Updated January 19, 2001

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