

Breaking the 10th Commandment

By Eliot Lugo-Hernández

Exodus, chapter 20, records the Ten Commandments that God, through His prophet Moses, gave to His chosen people, the children of Israel. These commandments were not given to make His people miserable, to “rain on their parade”, or to spoil their fun. God used these commandments to differentiate His people from the other people of the world and to protect them from the consequences of doing detestable things which displease God very much. God called out a people for Himself to be His representatives on earth; to tell other nations of a God who is a loving, compassionate, and merciful Father. The commandments were a way to show people who sinful they were and how much they needed God to live the life God wanted them to live. God always wants what is best for His children. The Bible states that [“No good thing will the LORD withhold from those who do what is right.”](#)¹

Deuteronomy 28 describes the blessings of obeying and the curses for disobeying God’s commands, laws, and mandates. Though it appears as a hard choice between obedience and disobedience, God, through Moses, gives the people of Israel the correct choice that they should make for their own good. In Deuteronomy 30:19, Moses says, [“Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, that you and your descendents might live!”](#) God’s gave His commandments as part of the covenant He established with His people. God promised them that, as they obey His commandments, He was going to bless them, protect them, and provide for them. If they

¹ Psalms 84:11b (NLT)

choose to disobey Him, then they will suffer the consequences of their action to go against God's established laws.

But, why would a people, which had seen the power of God in their deliverance and had tasted of God's goodness from their deliverance, through the wilderness, and towards the Promised Land, desire or choose to rebel against such a God? They saw the ten plagues God brought upon the Egyptians, they saw the Red Sea parted in two and the Pharaoh's army totally destroyed, and they ate bread from heaven and were provided water to sustain them through their journey. They were also led by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. What else could they have desired or wanted? They had God in their side; fighting for them, supplying their every need, and calling them to be His very own people. What else could anyone else want? When one has the Creator of heaven and earth on their side as a Father and as a Friend, what more could there ever be? Well, there is covetousness.

Breaking the tenth commandment is as easy as making illegal copies of music, computer software, or movies that come on CD, DVD, or Blu-ray® format; people usually don't think anything of it because they are unaware, or choose to ignore, that they are breaking the law. People look at covetousness just as they look at piracy; they justify their actions because they don't see the clear and present danger of doing either one.

The Bible mentions the word "covet" both in the OT and the NT. Depending on the context, the action to covet could be good or bad. In Exodus 20, to covet anything the neighbor has or owns is to have an abnormal passion or fascination for it. This anomaly has its root in jealousy. Jealous people are usually those who are very insecure; their self esteem is very low because they measure their worth by what they have, by who they know,

by what they wear, or by where they live. Luke 12:13-15 (KJV) states the following, “And one of the company said unto him, Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me. And he said unto him, **Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you?** And he said unto them, **Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.**” In the NLT, it reads, “Then someone called from the crowd, ‘Teacher, please tell my brother to divide our father’s estate with me.’ Jesus replied ‘**Friend, who made me a judge over you to decide such things as that?**’ Then he said, ‘**Beware! Don’t be greedy for what you don’t have. Real life is not measured by how much we own.**’” Jesus uses the word “greedy” as a synonym for covetousness. Also notice that, according to Jesus, greed comes from desiring after something one does not have. Keep in mind that covetousness is not limited to unbelievers; Christians can fall on this trap too by being jealous when God gives more talents or gifts to other fellow Christians. Instead of rejoicing that God has entrusted their fellow brothers with such gifts, some Christians feel forgotten and forsaken by God. For good or bad, those who covet are dissatisfied with who they are, what they have, what they earn, what they drive, where they live in, or what they do.

Proverbs 27:20 (KJV) states that “**Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied.**” The NLT version reads “**Just as Death and Destruction are never satisfied, so human desire is never satisfied.**” Make notice of the last two words in both translations; “never satisfied”. The Bible warns Christians (emphasis mine) to “*Stay away from the love of money; be satisfied with what you have.* For God has said, ‘I will never fail you. I will never forsake you.’ That is why we can say with confidence, ‘The

Lord is my helper, so I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?’”² Money is not the root cause of covetousness but the love of it because money is the vehicle by which things are obtained. Christians ought to be satisfied with what they have because God dwells within them and with them. There is no reason to covet other people’s things when God is on one’s life. When people have God in their lives, they have everything.

In the lives of many, there seems to be room to have more, to eat and drink more, to buy more, to know more, and to achieve more. Though these things are not evil in themselves, what makes them evil is the reason or basis behind them. An old preacher said, “Nothing depreciates your car more than your neighbors getting a new one.” Keeping up with the Jones’ has ruined many lives and destroyed many homes. As if there is some type of competition, people seem to look to be the one who has the most toys, the biggest houses, the latest cars, and the best clothes. As a result of this apparent competition, many are the ones who today are living with never-ending debts. Some, Christians and non-Christians, have lost their houses, their cars, and their families, while others, unable to deal with the depression that comes with too many debts, have taken their own lives. Those who take their lives somehow think that their action to terminate their lives is the end of their problems but they leave behind their unpaid debts as well as their loved ones grieving the loss of their loved one.

Those who covet think that they have to have what they are coveting after; they believe that they can’t live without it so they will do whatever it takes to get it even if it cost them their jobs, their families, and even their lives. And some people have paid dearly for something they thought that they had to have. Those who covet could turn to violence to

² Hebrews 13:5-6 (NLT)

obtain, at any cost, what they so desperately covet after. God says the following: “How terrible it will be for you who lie awake at night, thinking up evil plans. You rise at dawn and hurry to carry out any of the wicked schemes you have power to accomplish. When you want someone’s house, you take it by fraud and violence. No one’s family or inheritance is safe with you around!”³ This is a serious breach of obedience to the tenth commandment.

Let’s look at the life of a man whose covetousness caused him his life and the lives of his family. Joshua could not defeat the town of Ai because there was sin in the camp; someone disobeyed the LORD’s command of not touching the “accursed thing” while invading the town of Jericho. When confronted with the issue, a man named Achan said the following (emphasis added), “And Achan answered Joshua, and said, Indeed I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and thus and thus have I done: When I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight, then I *coveted* them, and took them; and, behold, they are hid in the earth in the midst of my tent, and the silver under it.”⁴ Verses 22 through 26 tell us what happened with him and with all that he had after they found the stuff he coveted after. Achan paid a price higher than the value of what he coveted after. As seen in this account, covetousness enslaves the one possessing it and it affects, not only themselves, but those around them as well.

Once they acquire what they have coveted after for so long, greedy people do not, will not, and cannot enjoy them because they can’t break God’s commandments and be at peace at the same time. Not only have they broken the tenth commandment, they have also

³ Micah 2:1 & 2 (NLT)

⁴ Joshua 7:20 & 21 (KJV)

broken the first commandment; “*Thou shalt have no other gods before me.*” Paul, the Apostle, viewed greed as equal to idolatry. The following Scripture is really a warning he sent to his fellow brothers in Ephesus (emphasis mine): “*Let there be no sexual immorality, impurity, or greed among you. Such sins have no place among God’s people. Obscene stories, foolish talk, and coarse jokes -- these are not for you. Instead, let there be thankfulness to God. You can be sure that no immoral, impure, or greedy person will inherit the Kingdom of Christ and of God. For a greedy person is really an idolater who worships the things of this world.*”⁵ So, when people covet or have greed in their hearts, they are really committing idol worshipping and they are breaking two commandments by the action of breaking one, the tenth commandment.

After working so hard to get the very things they did not have, covetous people found out, one more time, that they did not need them in the first place. They left the white dove of peace they had in their hands for the vulture of chaos flying high above. These people are constantly looking after the things they don’t have because they are not content with what they have even if what they have is good. The Bible states that “*It is better to have little with fear for the LORD than to have great treasure with turmoil.*”⁶ Greedy people live to have what they want instead of wanting what they already have. They buy things they don’t need with money they don’t have. People who constantly covet are fulfilled *until* something new comes up or someone new comes into their lives; the cycle goes on and on but they will never ever be truly satisfied until Jesus Christ sets them free from greed.

⁵ Ephesians 5:3-5 (NLT)

⁶ Proverbs 15:16 (NLT)

While the word “covet” in the tenth commandment has a negative implication, in the New Testament, this word has a different meaning. Writing to the Christians in Corinth, the Apostle Paul writes the following (emphasis mine), “Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that, miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But *covet earnestly* the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way.”⁷ Verses 30 and 31 read as follows in the NLT (emphasis mine): “Does everyone have the gift of healing? Of course not. Does God give all of us the ability to speak in unknown languages? Can everyone interpret unknown languages? No! And in any event, you should *desire* the most helpful gifts. First, however. Let me tell you about something else that is better than any of them.”

The Apostle Paul also stated the following (emphasis mine), “If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant. Wherefore, brethren, *covet to prophesy*, and forbid not to speak with tongues. Let all things be done decently and in order.”⁸ To *covet earnestly* or to *desire* the gifts of the Spirit is to want more of God. Those who do so are not content with their spiritual condition and that attitude is fine so long it leads them to an intimate and dynamic relationship with God through Jesus Christ. These kinds of people are deeply in love with God: heart, soul, mind

⁷ 1st Corinthians 12:27 (KJV)

⁸ 1st Corinthians 14:37 (KJV)

and body. Their sole purpose in life is to glorify God and to edify God's people; for them, anything else is a waste of material.

So, the next time you feel the urge to covet, remember that God will not hold you innocent for breaking His commandments, the 1st and the 10th commandments. God loves you and He has the best only He can offer and give. Be content and satisfied with what you have knowing that God has already provided for you way before you even knew you had a need. “So don't worry about having enough food or drink or clothing. Why be like the pagans who are so deeply concerned about these things? Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs, and he will give you all you need from day to day if you live for him and make the Kingdom of God your primary concern.”⁹

⁹ Matthew 6:31-33 (NLT)