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**The 10 Commandments – “Thou shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor”**

**Luke 12:15** - Jesus said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

**Exodus 20:17** - 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.

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This morning we are jumping back into our summer sermon series on the 10 Commandments and we'll begin to wrap it up as we look at the last of these moral laws – thou shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor. Some traditions count this as two commandments, separating out the coveting of your neighbor's wife from the neighbor's property, while others count it as one... simply “You shall not covet your neighbors stuff (wife included)”... If you remember back to week 1 of our series, the 1<sup>st</sup> weekend in July, you may recall that we had this same conundrum with the first commandment. Some counting it as one, others two...

- I am the Lord your God
- you shall have no other gods, or idols, before me

Depending on what tradition you were raised in, Jewish, Catholic, Lutheran, or most other mainline Protestant denominations, the numbering and grouping of these first and last commandments differs... but the content is always the same... So for our purposes, we're going to combine and talk about them together today.

Some of the previous commandments, upon first glance, seemed as if they didn't apply to us... Thou shall not kill, for instance... Our first reaction was a whew! I'm doing ok there! But unfortunately, this is a topic – coveting - that, if we're honest, none of us are truly free from. It hits to the heart of some of our basest desires – especially in our society today – lust and greed... of wanting what we should not, cannot, have. It is our unquenched desires, a need for constant satisfaction of the senses, that leaves us with a sense of dissatisfaction with life... always wanting more, particularly, that which our neighbor has! When we fail to reign in our hungers and thirsts, or put limits on any of our appetites, we experience a restlessness of the soul... a discontentment. And THAT is what this commandment is really

about. If there are no boundaries to our wants, there is no contentment in our lives. And what undermines our happiness is not necessarily a recognition of what we don't have, but a refusal to be **satisfied** with what we do have!

We spend life pressing to get what we want, anyway we can. And this culture feeds that, and competition and comparison fuels it! We call it keeping up with the Jones's. You've gotta have a car like his... a house as big as theirs. An outfit as stunning as hers. Competition for things pits us against the rest of the world. Because there's always going to be someone who has something bigger, better, faster, prettier... and the discontentment grows. What we WANT starts to burrow down into the center of the soul, and it makes it impossible to see and value what we DO have. As a result... everyone we meet is our potential enemy, competitor rather than an ally. What's she got? How much money does he have? If we would work a little harder, then we could make it!

We live in a culture that runs on satiation. John Lair, the American critic said, "Society drives people crazy with lust and calls it advertising." Turn on the TV, open a magazine, click through the internet, drive by a billboard... and you see it – it's all around us! At all ages, we are told what we must wear and look like to be successful and popular, what we must have to be noticed, what we must buy to be up to date, what we must do if we want to fit in.

But this commandment reminds us that we don't have to do any of those things. "You shall not covet your neighbors possessions." It tells us not to feed the beast of desire and accumulation. Not to let them drive us out of our minds, mad with wanting someone else's house, car, wife, job, boyfriend, beach club membership, or vacation plans. It causes us to recognize that, yes, we do know lust in our hearts, but we can and must learn how to say no to it! We have the ability to **control** ourselves and our desires, to choose whether we allow our wants to take over our lives and relationships... The question is, will we?

This commandment also points us to another great truth... Not only do we have the strength and power to control our wants – before we give them the power to control us... But we also have the assurance that our value and meaning in this life goes WAY beyond the material stuff that we surround ourselves with. This commandment invites us to look more closely at what we value most in life... is it really stuff and status? Does what we **have** determine our value as individuals? Because in our society, if we're not careful, what we HAVE, or don't have, becomes more important than who we are – or whose we are...

There's a great story of an old monastic who was said to have an unusually compassionate heart and deep, deep wisdom. People used to travel long distances to visit with him and gain just an ounce of his wisdom and deep peace. A young man once made the pilgrimage to visit this old monk, tucked away in a monastery. He was expecting to find this grand and glorious elder, but when he got there, he was taken back by the emptiness of the place. There were a number of people waiting to see the holy one, but there were no great shrines or dazzling statues, no larger than life alters, or candlesticks, or icons, or pulpits in the monastery as he walked around. When he made his way to the room where the old man lived, he was shocked by the sparseness. There was simply a desk, a cot, a Bible, a basin, some papers, and a pen.

When the young man looked around in dismay at the room, shocked at its barrenness, he scoffed... "Are you the famous elder? Is this all you have?" To which the elder asked, "Why, what do you have?" The young man shot back, "Well, I don't have anything... why would I... I'm not from here... I'm just passing through." "I know," the old monastic said, "so am I."

Jesus told a parable about this... about a wealthy landowner that kept building bigger barns to store all his "stuff"... but when he died that very night, he wasn't able to bring any of that stuff with him... what mattered was not how much he had, but what was in his heart.

This final commandment points us to a deep spiritual truth that exists in each of the great faith traditions of our world, that only God is EVERYTHING. Only God is what life is really about. To see beyond all the things that we possess, to hold them in a light grasp, not letting them take control of our lives, and to discover that our value lies instead in the one from whom all things come.

Once we're able to find assurance and peace that God is all and everything comes from God, then we know that our value doesn't come from what we have, but from who and whose we are... beloved children of a loving God. Then we don't have to scramble to make meaning and status from the material stuff around us... we don't have to want what our neighbor has... we don't have to lie, cheat, or steal... Instead, we are called to know the deep peace and contentment that comes from knowing, trusting, and loving the one true God. When we can do that, we find that what matters most is love and relationships, community and supporting one another, working with and for God, so the Kingdom of Heaven becomes more and more real here and now.

In many ways, the first and last commandments are complementary... for when we truly worship the one true God, and put away all idols, there is nothing that could compare with God... No thing, or trinket, or status that matters more than the journey to the heart of God. May your journey into God begin and end by letting go of anything lesser on the way that obstructs your vision of what is truly important... our Great God of love. Amen.