

“Covet God and Be Saved”  
Sermon for the 31 January 2021  
Texts: Exodus 20:12-21

I was struck by the poetic structure of the Ten Commandments. Have you noticed how chiasmic they are in structure—which aids in memorization, no doubt? First a definition, then an example:

In rhetoric, chiasmus or, less commonly, chiasm, is a "reversal of grammatical structures in successive phrases or clauses – but no repetition of words".

An example:

Goldsmith: “to stop too fearful, and too faint to go.”

The last commandment, **Thou shalt not covet** mirrors the first commandment which could be stated, *Thou shalt covet Me, your God, above all else*. The commandments start in our hearts of worship, our interior realm and move outwards (**no other gods, no images of likenesses of any god, you shall not bow down to, or serve them . . . for I am a jealous God who favors those who favor me.**) Then, the second half starts with the overt, outward acts and moves inward, to the realm of most intense desire: **Thou shalt not covet . . . any one, or anything but Me!** Coveting values a particular thing more highly than it does desiring, trusting, or obeying God—it put something other than God in the place, first place, reserved for God. In this light, **Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, they shall be filled** could be offered as a definition of coveting—a hunger and thirst.

The coy wife of Bath in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales poses the question: “What does a woman most desire?” She is asking about *coveting*. What does a woman covet most? Unfortunately, it is not God! No, the answer to this riddle takes a deep dive into the jealousy between the sexes. What a woman most desires is to over-master her husband, in short to rule over him whom God has ordained to be her head—as Christ is head of the church! Paul was not so foolish as to frame this arrangement as one of domination or superiority *but of office, service and duty*. Mutual love promotes the right kind of headship and it doesn’t veer off into abusive manipulation, or selfishness. God’s intent is freeing, not oppressive. But, domestic order aside, coveting God, desiring God above all else is the main thrust of the first three commandments. Furthermore, coveting Christ is necessary to having Christ; he lives in and imparts life to all who, from their heart of hearts, covet his friendship.

We are attending to the movement from interior to outwardness that starts with **I am the Lord your God/you shall have no others** (interior) and proceeds to **make no images, do not serve them to thou shalt not take the name of the Lord your God in vain**. The gift of the Sabbath is given so that we may rest in the truths just stated, meditate on them, bask in their light. This order is reversed in the second tablet: it starts with the outward (**Honor your parents, don’t murder, do not commit adultery, thou shalt not steal and thou shalt not bear false witness** (degrade, dishonor or betray through speech, or testimony in court), which are overt acts and proceeds to the interior with **thou shalt not covet**. The vocabulary, you should **love the Lord Your God with all your heart, soul, mind and might** (that is, covet God!) differs from **thou shalt not covet anything that is your neighbor’s** (which is the reverse of coveting

God). If this feels Hebraic, or Old Testament-ish, all well and good, because it does have that feel, that flavor. The poetic form was familiar to Jewish listeners; it possesses the feel of truth, and scent of revelation as it appears repeatedly throughout) the Scriptures.

Glancing at the setting of Israel's situation, before the Mountain of God, Sinai, we note two postures: **removing, standing afar off** and **drawing near**. The people of God do the first, and Moses **draws near to the thick darkness where God was**. In other words, the people withdraw from the presence of the Lord whereas Moses seeks the presence of the Lord despite **the thick darkness**. Darkness certainly is ominous sounding, but withdrawing is exactly the opposite of what God sought from His people. Remember, **I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage**. (20:2) I loved you enough to deliver, rescue and redeem you. Why aren't you joyful, and grateful? What have I done that you should mistrust Me? That question, or one close to it, might well have been asked to Eve: why have you mistrusted my provision, my care, love and friendship and disregarded my one commandment (**Don't eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil**)? Instead she coveted what was forbidden, she took and ate of the forbidden fruit.

There is foreshadowing here, the people will not enter and possess the land when bid to do so—why? Because they measured the challenge and the difficulties of possessing the land (driving out the inhabitants) by their own strength—this error in judgment was repeated many times in the history of Israel . . . and, I think, in the history of the church. Too, too often we have walked by sight instead of by faith.

What explains this? How did they come to misread the situation? How did they make themselves afraid **so that they were afraid and trembled and stood afar off** (v.18)? It was their preference for comfort and safety, perhaps. **The thunderings and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet and the mountain smoking—and not being consumed!— all manifestations of His majesty!** which Moses advises them about, **Fear not, for God is come to prove you** (as in “testing” your love, your desires, your coveting—for your good and not your harm) **and that His fear may be before your face**—be present to you, that reverencing and respecting God, you not choose to sin (**that you sin not**). God is powerful, almighty, glorious and holy *but these are not attributes of God to be afraid of, rather they are to be respected*. And that is chiefly because He has already demonstrated His love for them and declared Himself to be for them (**I am your God and you are My people**). Start with that, keep to that and your fear of the Lord will be both healthy and beneficial.

Isaiah 55: 5 **Behold, you will call a nation you do not know,  
And a nation which does not know you will run to you,  
Because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel;  
For He has glorified you.”**

**6 Seek the Lord while He may be found;  
Call upon Him while He is near.**

**7 Let the wicked abandon his way,  
And the unrighteous person his thoughts;**

**And let him return to the Lord,  
 And He will have compassion on him,  
 And to our God,  
 For He will abundantly pardon.  
 8 “For My thoughts are not your thoughts,  
 Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord**

This is a far cry from the craven, cringing terror of God—*that* is Satan’s response to the approach of God. We stand in the presence of God, Satan shrinks—he slithers or slinks, a skulking, diminished and nervous presence. It is **so that you may not sin**. (v.20) “He is not safe, but he is good,” Mr. Beaver, from Narnia, comforted Lucy when she trembled.

Looking closer at the order of human duties implicit in commands six through eight, we discover, significantly a descending order of importance: crimes against life (**murder**), marriage (**adultery**), property (**theft**). This trajectory seems unbroken as the tongue sins of **slander and false witness** appear next. However, at this point, the law passes the boundary between human law and divine law and, with a startling impact, addresses the source of all four forbidden transgressions in *unspoken and enacted desires*, **in covetousness**. This is, perhaps, what Paul meant by the Law teaching him: **Thou shalt not covet. Coveting leads to murder, adultery, thievery and false witness!** Coveting is a doorway motivation. Jesus addresses this very shift in His clarifications of hatred as murder, of lusting as adultery. BUT, as I pointed out already, these come from coveting the wrong things, from coveting after earthly things, temporal gain—although I hesitate to label murder, adultery, thievery, or lying “gains!” Those who covet God above all will not stoop to such levels of depravity.

The first commandment is only obeyed when our hearts hunger and thirst after Him, or after Jesus, in sincerity and truth. To love God is to honor God. In fact, that point of honor is the point on which the transition from the first to the second tablet of the law is hinged. **Honor your father and your mother** (so **that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you**—the first command with promise!) is different from **Love your father and your mother**. This is before God, not man! Colossians 3:20 reads: **Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord**. Again, love and obedience are not commonly linked in our thinking *but they are linked in God’s word!* Recall how Jesus links them explicitly when He re-asserts that **those who love Him will keep His commandments** (John 14: 15-31). This is exactly what God puts forth in Exodus 20:6!—demonstrating 1. that God never changes, and 2. that there is an identity of divinity between God the Father and God the Son.)

But the point of honor here is based on the analogy of *this reverence due to God, even to God as our heavenly father!* Maybe submission and respect are more palatable to our modern ears approached from this angle. Urban life, education, the general impairment of authority in our culture have combined with negative effect upon family life. Some parents being overindulgent (a particular problem with the post-World War II generation of parents, now great grandparents!) and others being overly engrossed in worldly business (the absent dad scenario—or two working parents scenario), who surrendered prestige, position and control for worldly, or materialistic goals. People

who show great diligence in their professional pursuits are often guilty of neglecting spiritual advancement almost entirely! When parental responsibilities are shuffled off onto the “professionals” (either school teachers, or state-funded day care), a solvent is introduced which dissolves both family life and society—parents’ children grow up to be clueless parents (sometimes). Those freed from the demands of farming, rural life and manual labor by locating to looser, more liberal urban settings even, will find other task masters (jobs, bosses, companies) taking their place.

The ground of the commandment **thou shalt not kill** is not given, perhaps because the conscience was expected to be intact, so as to immediately admit the force of the command. It appears at the head of the second tablet, drawing our attention to its possible relationship to the first commandment—suggestion that a man’s life is sacred because he is the image of God. He is born in that image, and birth is not merely a biological reproduction! As Christians we find an additional layer added when we absorb what Christ laid down: hatred is murder and quite opposite to love which is the fulfillment of the law *as of all other laws*<sup>1</sup>.

The seventh commandment (**Thou shalt not commit adultery**) relates to the sanctity of marriage, or of the covenant of married life. Given the place of women in Jewish culture, this may be taken as a divine respect for womanhood. However, given the polyamorous tendency of male fornicators, there is an endorsement of purity, reserved self-control implied as well. Fidelity best serves the exclusive relationships established by marriage along with affection and trust. The honorable status of the marriage bed reinforces the goodness of this divine institution, with God officiating at the first marriage before society, norms and social customs even appeared! An abundance of bread and idleness, the ease and facility of divorce, the moral filth passed off as romance and heroic adventure, the over-emphasis on sensuality and pleasure-seeking which inform the plots of fiction books, movies and videos have promoted infidelity and sexual adventurism well beyond reasonable biblical bounds. Premarital sex is actually ungodly. Fornication may be natural, but it is not advisable. The lifestyles that promote it are typically injurious—yes, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Youth could use godly direction and scriptural correction for wading through the pitfalls and weeds of hyper-sexuality. And, adultery is a subtle form of theft—the taking of something which belongs to another and enjoying it as your own—often secretly and through lies and deception.

**Thou shalt not steal.** Theft is the taking and keeping of what is not “mine.” Looting in the name of reparations, or protests of inequity and simple outrage do not justify theft. One of the more insidious doctrines of the socialist left, is the claim, made explicitly by Communists, that “all property is theft.” Interestingly, this seems aimed at private property. It sidesteps the biblical understanding that all property is “*trust property*,” something entrusted to us for us to steward, improve and pass on to others better than we received it. This stewardship doctrine has the extra benefit of refuting the common error of assuming that ownership entitles one “to do what I wish with what is mine.” We

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<sup>1</sup> Here’s Luther’s comprehensive paraphrase of the duties of the law: “Patience, gentleness, kindness, peaceableness, pity, and, of all things, a sweet, friendly heart, without any hate bitterness toward any, even enemies.” Some of Luther’s polemics deviate from the spirit of this summary—but there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his better angels.

hold property to enjoy the use of, to distribute it to others, and to share what the land produces. Some of this is new ground. Still theft includes all sharp and crafty business practices, the shopkeeper's false scales, pigs in a poke, the merchants' equivalences such as selling air, adulteration, dilution, mislabeling, false advertising, piracy of intellectual property, copyright infringements, patent intrusions—regardless of the fancy names given such “arts”, they all boil down to unlawful taking, to stealing.

**False witness** covers testimony in courts, under oath, but it extends much further. All sin of the tongue, both subtle and common (slander, gossip, character assassination) are gathered under this heading. Yes, and fake news. Censorship is a form of false witness because it entails the suppression of the truth, and the spinning of narrative to further some political ends, business advantage, and advertising triumph. Speaking the worst of another is devilish and hurts many a person's good name—especially when they aren't allowed to defend themselves (such as trial by allegation, smearing and crass characterizations which assert far more than the speaker knows to be true) as well as projection. Spiteful persons accuse others of their own proclivities so as to justify the wrong they are committing. “A man who beareth false witness against his neighbor is a maul and a sword and a sharp arrow,” he is a destroyer. Your slander may be delicious when spoken, but it produces bitter fruit, pay back and retribution and not just from the injured parties. God judges those who commit false witness regardless of political allegiance, or religious affiliation.

And that brings us to the **bitter black property of evil covetousness**. I say “evil” because we have already advanced the notion of positive covetousness, where one desires good things like God, or Jesus Christ . . . such as **hungering and thirsting after righteousness**. Those who covet wickedly, tap into the source of all breaches of neighborly duty. They do not love others; they act hateful, greedily and selfishly, because their own pleasure, self-gratification is all they care about—not about obedience to God, and not the well-being of others! If all that matters is “I want it and I want it now,” none of the commandments will be left standing . . . swept away like mere cobwebs. Burglars may sweep away spiderwebs, gaining entrance to your home, but they are not there to contribute to spring cleaning. Paul describes such persons as “idolaters,” as those who are as incapable of loving God as they are of loving their neighbors. In the dark places where deeds are fashioned, God has shined the light of His commandments. It agitates the droves of bats, and twilight-loving creatures who operate under cover of darkness. Selfish desire is itself a transgression of all the law whether it detracts from God, or destroys our duty toward one another.

**Amen**