

# The Ten Commandments 10. You shall not covet anything that is your neighbor's. Concluding Comments on the Commandments

last update Dec. 23, 2001

You shall not covet your neighbor's house;  
you shall not covet your neighbor's wife,  
or his manservant,  
or his maidservant  
or his ox, or his ass,  
or anything that is your neighbor's

Exodus 20:17 (RSV)

## Topics

### The Tenth Commandment

1. The 10th Commandment. Introduction
  - 1.1. The Question Over the Meaning of *Hamad*, To Covet
  - 1.2. A Matter of the Heart
  - 1.3. Implications of the Commandment as a Matter of the Heart
2. Desire
  - 2.1. Misdirected Desire
  - 2.2. A Commandment About Our Deepest Desires
  - 2.3. Changing Our Hearts and Deepest Desires
3. Coveting and Consumerism

### The Ten Commandments: Concluding Comments

4. Concluding Comments on the Commandments
  - 4.1. A Unique Revelation
  - 4.2. Position of the Commandments in Faith
  - 4.3. Two Truths That Stand Out in the Study of the Commandments
    - 4.3.1. Two Truths
    - 4.3.2. The Centrality of God
    - 4.3.3. The Rewards of Righteousness
  - 4.4. Jesus and the Commandments
    - 4.4.1. What is Necessary for Eternal Life?
    - 4.4.2. The Fulfillment of the Law
    - 4.4.3. Which Commandment is First of All?

### References

## 1. The 10th Commandment. Introduction

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  
- Exodus 20:17 (NRSV)

### 1.1. The Question Over the Meaning of *Hamad*, To Covet

There is a controversy among biblical scholars over the intended meaning of Hebrew verb "covet" in this Commandment:

- verb is *hamad* (to covet, lust after)
- Does it mean a:
  - the combination of the feeling of desire plus the action to obtain the object of desire, or
  - just the feeling of desire for that which belongs to another?

### 1.2. A Matter of the Heart

Most commentators conclude that the intended meaning of "to covet" refers to an attitude of the heart and mind:

**"the commandment is probably solely concerned with attitudes of the heart/mind that subtly or not so subtly lead to the misuse of that which is not one's own."**

- Terrence Fretheim, Exodus, Interpretation Bible Commentary Series

The 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment thus differs from the previous commandments about sins against one's neighbor. It warns:

- not against an *action* (murder, stealing, adultery, lying testimony),
- but against a *state of the heart*, a *feeling*

The 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment ". . .relates to the spirit of the individual that forms the interior ground of the violation of the other commandments."

- Terrence Fretheim, Exodus, Interpretation Bible Commentary Series

It can thus be seen as an appropriate "culmination" of the Ten Commandment.

### 1.3. Implications of the Commandment as a Matter of the Heart

That the Tenth Commandment is a warning against a particular state of the heart, a feeling, implies:

- God wants us not just to be a people who does not murder, steal, commit adultery or lie, but in addition:
- God wants us to be a people *who are not tempted* to murder, steal, commit adultery or lie, a people *in whose heart* such acts are repulsive

"Obedience" to the Tenth Commandment cannot be a simple act of will, as the "state of our hearts" and the "duties of our heart" are not under our conscious control, or even always under our conscious purview.

**" . . . it is easier to obey 'duties of the limbs,' those obligations and prohibitions that involve outward behavior, and which thus involve social approbation and disapprobation, than it is to fulfill the 'duties of the heart,' since 'only' God knows if we have fulfilled the latter, not our neighbors, or, often, not even ourselves."**

- paraphrase by Rabbi Weiman-Kelman in **Broken Tablets** of Bahya ibn pakuda in his 11<sup>th</sup> century work **Duties of the Heart**

## 2. Desire

### 2.1. Misdirected Desire

The 10th commandment is not against desire. Human beings are driven by desire. The Commandment is specifically against a *desire for that which is not properly one's own*. This is:

- a misdirection of desire
- a desire destructive to community
- a desire destructive to the person who covets

**“It is not forbidden to wish to have a house like my neighbor’s house or a car like his or even a woman just like his wife. What is forbidden, I think, is to want *his* car or *his* wife, *her* house or *her* husband -- to replace the other, not to replicate her. It is all right to want to have a big house. It is forbidden to want to live in someone else’s house or life. I am commanded to be me, not you or her. I am forbidden to covet *your* place, to wish to be *you*.”**

- Rabbi Arnold Wolf, in **Broken Tablets**

**“to covet is to deny our own life and our own being, which God cannot abide”**

- Rabbi Rachel S. Mikva in **Broken Tablets**

### 2.2. A Commandment About Our Deepest Desires

(from Keenan)

Both Luther and Calvin commented that the 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment is about our “deepest desires”

Our “deepest desires” are:

- rarely expressible
- complex, wanting satisfaction in a variety of ways
- often discernable / felt in:
  - disappointments of expectations arising from them. Disappointments can be “windows” to our deepest desires
  - loss
  - the pleasure or happiness in seeing something that fits in with those desires

Our goal as Christians:

- our deepest desires should be grounded in a love of God and neighbor
- images and hope for the “kingdom of God” = a world where God rules and God’s will is done, should live in our deepest desires

**“As Christians, we have a deeply abiding and viscerally felt image of the kingdom of God that we carry in our hearts.”**

- Keenan

In the Tenth Commandment, **“we confront our own desire for a loving relationship with God. Will I covet the things of this world, and envy others the things I don’t have, or will I turn all my desire to the Lord?”**

- Timmerman

## 2.3. Changing Our Hearts and Deepest Desires

Changing our hearts and deepest desires is perhaps the work of lifetime. We must:

- learn an enduring, grateful satisfaction with our lot (the opposite of coveting)
- “discipline our hearts to accept what is ours and what cannot be ours (objects and abilities)” - Mikva
- have no “false idols.” We must turn both our minds and hearts to God. For this reason:
  - first and last Commandment are often described as “bookends” to the Commandments
  - violation of the Tenth Commandment comes out of a violation of the First Commandment.

To learn “an enduring, grateful satisfaction with our lot” involves knowledge of ourselves, which is also no simple task, a task that is also a work of a lifetime.

## 3. Coveting and Consumerism

(from Brueggemann)

We must recognize that we live in a culture and society that encourages a type of coveting called consumerism

**“the propensity to covet in our society is enacted through an unbridled consumerism that believes the main activity of human life is to accumulate, use, and enjoy more and more of the available resources of the earth.”**

- Brueggemann

This consumerism is based on an assumption of scarcity, which justifies accumulating all that one can.

**“This commandment summons the faithful to break with the practice of acquisitive individualism and to reject the ideology of scarcity upon which it is based.”**

- Brueggemann

The rejection of the coveting of consumerism, which is an “activity of untrusting restlessness,” links the Tenth Commandment with the Fourth Commandment on the Sabbath.

## 4. Concluding Comments on the Commandments

### 4.1. A Unique Revelation

(from Brueggemann)

The Decalogue (Exodus 20:1-17), the “Ten Words” or “Ten Utterances” of God is:

- the only direct address of commands from God to Israel
- thus a unique revelation

### 4.2. Position of the Commandments in Faith

Views of the relationship of the Commandments to faith:

- 1. Non-negotiable will of God. Absolute rules / laws of God
- 2. “mission statement” of the community of the faithful, providing a framework for specific actions
- 3. “instructions” for the “inculcation of an attitude of the mind / heart” (Fretheim)

## 4.3. Two Truths That Stand Out in the Study of the Commandments

### 4.3.1. Two Truths

Timmerman suggests two truths stand out in the study of the Commandments:

- The Centrality of God
- The Rewards of Righteousness

### 4.3.2. The Centrality of God

God is central to all the commandments:

- Commandments fundamentally relate to our relationship with God
- violation of any Commandment is an offense against God, an undoing of God's intention for creation
- God's passionate response when we mistreat our neighbor is seen in Exodus 22:21-27

### 4.3.3. The Rewards of Righteousness

A heart turned towards God through loving obedience to the Commandments will find peace:

**“O that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your prosperity would have been like a river, and your success like the waves of the sea;”**

- Isaiah 48:18 (NRSV)

**“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”**

- John 14:27 (NRSV)

## 4.4. Jesus and the Commandments

### 4.4.1. What is Necessary for Eternal Life?

Asked what is necessary for eternal life, Jesus cites some of commandments, but suggests a serious disciple can do more (Matt 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-30).

- Commandments are a “threshold to more serious discipleship and a step on the demanding way to ‘eternal life!’” (Brueggemann)

### 4.4.2. The Fulfillment of the Law

**“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter; not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.**

**Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”**

- Matthew 5:17-19 (NRSV)

#### **4.4.3. Which Commandment is First of All?**

When asked, "Which Commandment is the first of all?", Jesus answered,

**“The first is, ‘Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’**

**The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”**

- Mark 12:28-31 (NRSV):

## **References**

- Broken Tablets. Restoring the Ten Commandments and Ourselves.** Rachel S. Mikva, editor. Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 1999.
- Commandments of Compassion.** James F. Keenan, S.J. Sheed & Ward, Franklin, WI, 1999
- Do We Still Need the Ten Commandments. A Fresh Look at God’s Laws of Love.** John H. Timmerman. Augsburg. Minneapolis, 1997
- Exodus. (Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching.)** Terence E. Fretheim, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1991
- The Book of Exodus.** Walter Brueggemann. In: The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume I. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994
- The Book of Exodus. A Critical, Theological Commentary.** The Old Testament Library. Brevard S. Childs. Westminster Press, Louisville, 1974
- The JPS Torah Commentary. Exodus.** Nahum M. Sarna. The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1991