

## ***You Shall Not Covet***

In the name of him who came not to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them for us, dear friends in Christ: Today once again we enter the penitential season of Lent. It's a time the Church sets aside each year to prepare the hearts and minds of her sons and daughters to make that journey with Jesus that leads to his suffering and death on the cross for the sins of the world. It's a time to examine ourselves in the light of God's Holy Law and reflect with sorrow on our own sins that made Christ's suffering necessary. And to help us in this regard, this year in our evening meditations we'll be taking a closer look at the Ten Commandments for together they are the perfect mirror God has set up to show us our sins.

Martin Luther was fond of saying that anyone who really understood the Ten Commandments understood everything there is to know about theology. That may strike us as a bit of an overstatement; but part of what he meant was that it's simply not possible for sinners such as ourselves to ever get to the end of the study of God's Law. After all, the moral Law describes what it means to love as God loves. And fallen as we are, we're not capable of that. We always fall short. Thus the study of the Law will lead us to deeper understanding, yes, but having arrived at some new level of insight we'll inevitably find there's another layer that's deeper still. And so it goes. We won't get to the bottom of it until we are perfected as we will be in the life to come. Still, God desires our spiritual growth even now. And we do too, which is why we need to keep moving in that direction through the study of the Law.

We begin this evening with the Ninth and Tenth Commandments, both of which prohibit the sin of coveting. One deals with coveting with our neighbor's home and real estate, and the other with our neighbor's other possessions and the people who are attached to them in some way. Why it's divided into two separate commands is unclear. God could have said simply "Don't covet anything that belongs to your neighbor" and leave it at that. Of course, then we'd only have nine commandments instead of ten; and that just wouldn't have the same majestic ring to it. More to the point, maybe it's divided into two commandments so that we'll be forced to give them more attention than we might have otherwise.

For the commandments against coveting are different than the rest. The others include actions of some kind. Committing adultery, killing, stealing, and so on: they involve physical acts. They can be seen by others. And you can be prosecuted in a court of law for doing them. But coveting is entirely a sin of the heart and mind. You could be coveting like crazy without anyone (except for the Lord) ever knowing it. And you certainly can't be sent to jail for it. But coveting is a deadly cancer of the soul. It's far more serious than we might be inclined think. And it's the evil seed that once planted and allowed to grow gives birth to all kinds of other sins. Indeed, it's probably fair to say that most of the sins we commit have their origin in covetousness. If only we could stop it there, pull it up by the root before it grew to maturity, we'd be much better off. Maybe that's why God gave us two commands against coveting.

But what exactly is coveting? In answer, let me first say what it's not. Coveting isn't, as many people believe, simply the desire to have something that's not yours. No. The Lord has filled his creation with good things for us to enjoy. It's only right that we desire to have them. And think about it: the economy depends on consumers wanting things that they don't own and buying them from those who do. Shopping stores, markets of exchange, trade, commerce, the classified ads, even KMA's elephant shop – these are all good things, and they work because

people want to buy things they don't have from the people who do. No problem there. It's no sin to want things, to seek them out, to buy them, or even offer to buy them from those who haven't explicitly said they're willing to sell.

No, coveting is *sinful* desire to have something. What can make a desire sinful? Several things. First, desire is sinful if its object is something the Lord has prohibited to you. If you want illegal drugs or stolen merchandise, for example, you're coveting because your desire is for things the Lord doesn't want you to have. Same thing with someone else's spouse. They're off limits. God doesn't want you to have them. And he doesn't want you thinking that you do. That's coveting. And like I said, that's where it starts. Nip it in the bud now, confess it for the sin that it is, repent and turn from it before it becomes adultery and ruins a lot of people's lives. Another example of having a desire for something God has prohibited is a woman who seeks the office of pastor in the church. The Lord has said no to that. Likewise, if a man is what they call "transgendered", that is, he thinks he'd be better off as a woman, starts dressing that way, gets hormone treatments, maybe even has "sex reassignment surgery" – he's pursuing something the Lord does not want him to have. If God had wanted him to be a woman, he would have made him that way. Thus his desire to be something other than what God made him is coveting.

Another way desire can be sinful is if it's selfish or envious in nature. "I want this mostly because I don't want you do have it", or "because it will bring honor to me, turn heads my way, impress people, or get me out of having to fulfill certain obligations" are all examples of selfish desire – which means that it's coveting.

You can be sure you're coveting if you want something in such a way that you're considering taking immoral actions or illicit measures to acquire it. If your plan to get whatever it is involves bending the law, fraud, deceit, or outright theft, yeah, you're coveting.

And finally, what's probably the most common form of coveting we engage in is when our desire for something has its origin in lack of contentment. "I need this thing to make me happy, and I won't be happy without it." And look, we're not talking about basic necessities here. If you're starving to death, your desire for food isn't coveting. It's a matter of life or death. No, here we're talking about things you don't absolutely need but that you think you do. King Ahab in this evening's Old Testament lesson is a case in point. He builds himself a nice palace on a piece of property and then decides he'd like to expand the estate. He wants to purchase the adjoining vineyard that belongs to Naboth and convert it into a vegetable garden. How commendable: he wants to eat right. Michelle Obama would be proud of him.

But Naboth doesn't want to sell. And he's not just being stubborn. We make a big deal about century farms – places that have been in the same family for over one hundred years. Multiply that sentiment by a thousand, and you'll get some idea about how land owning Israelites felt about their property. This vineyard has been in Naboth's family since the time of the conquest under Joshua some six hundred years earlier. It's been handed down through a dozen generations or more. But more importantly, this is the land God gave the family. It's their everlasting inheritance in the Promised Land. Naboth is rightly insulted that the king thinks he might be willing to exchange or sell it.

As we heard, his refusal sends the king into a royal temper tantrum. He sulks about as if in mourning, refuses to eat, and lies moping in bed all day. The poor baby. His wife, the notorious Jezebel, tells him to man up and act like a king. But then she acts more like his mommy and tells him she'll take care of everything. She launches an evil plan that involves

violating the commandments against false witness, murder, and theft. His coveting sets off a whole chain of others sins. And whether King Ahab is aware and complicit in her plan is uncertain; but one thing's for sure, when he finds out Naboth is dead, he doesn't ask any questions. He pounces upon the property he coveted. He got what his sinful heart so badly desired.

Tempting as it is to point our fingers and accuse him for the scoundrel that he is, it's far more consistent with the purpose of Lent and much better for us to recognize that what we see in Ahab is a reflection of our own covetous thoughts and desires. We may not go through all of the outward theatrics – most of us learned to give that up somewhere along the way to adulthood – but the attitude of the heart is the same. I need this to be happy, or compete, or fulfilled, or whatever it is I think this thing will give me; and I refuse to be content without it. It's a way of saying that God is not doing a very good job of taking care of me. It's a demonstration of ingratitude for the countless blessings that he has so freely given.

And we all do it. We all covet. And it's especially a problem for us because we are so prosperous. There are all kinds of toys out there for us to acquire. And advertisers know it. They're always waving them in our faces precisely so that we will covet them. Then there are shows on television that feature fabulous new homes and remodeling old ones, fantastic vacations in exotic places; eat the best food, wear the finest clothes, drive the right car, have the perfect wedding. And you'll be happy.

And that's only to speak of the *stuff* that's out there. We covet other people's talents, their good looks, their fine physiques, their robust health, their accomplishments, their cushier or better paying jobs, their friends, their business contacts, and their intelligent, well behaved children. Why can't mine be that way? Even in the church, we covet. One church wants another's pastor. He's friendlier, funnier, writes shorter sermons. We covet church members. We take secret pleasure when the congregation down the road is experiencing conflict because it means that some of the refugees may find their way to join us here. We hope they're the ones with money who will help us keep up with our budget.

And I'm just scratching the surface here. But I think I've made the point: our problem with the sin of coveting is a lot bigger than we're aware of. And it's the gateway to so many other sins. So tonight I'm asking you to examine yourself. What is it that *you* are coveting? What have you coveted in the past without even realizing it? Name these things to yourself. Recognize your covetousness for the sin it is. And repent.

And let's do one more thing. In view of the fact that so many of our desires are sinful, let's ask the Lord to fill us with desire for the godly things he wants us to have that we so often neglect and despise. Let's ask him to give us hunger for his Word, passion to be filled with his Holy Spirit, joy in celebrating the Sacrament of Holy Communion, and eagerness to hear those blessed words of comfort: for the sake of Christ the Lord who suffered and died for your sins, you are forgiven. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***