

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer
September 28, 2008
www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org

The Principle of Balance Exodus 20:17

At first glance, the Tenth Commandment strikes us as anticlimactic. The Word of God has given us clear directions in short, declarative sentences: “Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness.” We ready ourselves to hear God announce the ultimate sin, to hear God prohibit some truly terrible deed. Instead God offers a warning against wrong thinking. God says to us, ‘Do not think destructive, seductive thoughts. Thou shalt not covet.’ God says to us, ‘Do not go through life envious of the achievements and attainments of those around you.’ In this last word of divine guidance God speaks not against any discernible external action but addresses our internal disposition, forbidding not a physical act but a state of mind. The Divine Word warns us against entertaining the thought, ‘Hey, I wish that what is theirs was mine.’ In response to God’s instructions, frankly, our initial reaction is twofold: First, we ask: ‘What’s so bad about coveting?’ Second, we ask, ‘How can we keep from doing it?’ What is so bad about wanting somebody else’s car, somebody else’s job, somebody else’s talent? If my neighbor has a better house, a nicer car, a more lucrative job, a more wonderful family, a more prestigious reputation, why *shouldn’t* I desire what he has? And even if there is something wrong with doing it, how can I keep from coveting?

Let’s address the first question first: what’s so wrong about coveting? My short answer is, *it throws our lives out of balance.* I can best demonstrate that answer by means of the “Schneider parable,” though I suspect you are unfamiliar with the Schneider parable, primarily because you never knew my great-aunt Elizabeth or her dog Schneider, upon whom this parable is based. My great-aunt Elizabeth and her husband Jim had no children except Schneider, who warranted the title, “Most pampered canine ever to walk the earth.” My Aunt Elizabeth would order chicken at a restaurant, cut off the wing for herself, then take the breast out to Schneider in the car. Schneider came to expect and express a need for the best of everything -- and he received it. As a result of his insatiable appetites, and my great-aunt’s ceaseless indulgence of his every whim, Schneider developed the belly of a pelican wedded to the frame of a schnauzer. Schneider’s approach to life literally threw his life out of balance. It would be fair to say that Schneider’s love of the good life ended his good life prematurely. Similarly, coveting tends to make us hunger for good things in such a way that it throws our lives out of balance. Our Lord expresses the paradox quite clearly: he turns the loaves and fishes into a meal to feed the hungry thousands, but he also forcefully declares, “Thou shalt not live by bread alone.” Good things are good. But if good things become the primary pursuit of our life, they form our sole motivation for living, so that our lust for good things can surely end our good life prematurely. Our Lord aptly phrased the principle of balance: “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness – and all other things will be added unto you.”

What is so wrong with coveting? What is so wrong living a life of envy and rapacious jealousy? What is so wrong going through life wishing we had what somebody else possessed? The answer is simply this: *such wishing disorients our existence.* I can explain what I am trying to say metaphorically.

We begin by recognizing that God is responsible for all creation: the world's pleasures are "very good." In the overall design of creation, God has placed all these good things under our feet. We are designed, of course, to place God in our heart. What happens in the process of coveting is that the pursuit of those things that are meant to be at our feet has a way of pushing God out of our heart, and we become slaves to those very things over which we are meant to be master. Once that happens, our lives become disoriented.

But how can we avoid coveting?
How can we see the good things others have and not envy their lives, not be jealous of their good fortune?
We must go back to God's first principle: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."
We can keep the Tenth Commandment by heeding the First Commandment.
The more I study the Ten Commandments the more I realize that the First and the Tenth form brackets.
We keep the Tenth by keeping the First, and we keep the First by keeping the Tenth.
How do we structure our lives in such a way as to keep our pursuits in balance?
We do so by working to ensure that God is our true God. We must keep the Master master in our heart.
And how do we keep the First Commandment?
By refusing to delude ourselves that all manner of things can enrich our lives without recourse to the divine.

The Tenth Commandment is a statement of genius because it recognizes the connection between desire and deed.

The Tenth Commandment commands us to think about our ambitions, our values, the pursuits that really motivate us. Desire breeds deed. Deed roots in desire!
If we don't monitor our thoughts, our ambitions, our dreams and desires, they can orient our lives in a destructive direction.
You and I look at our neighbors and think,
'Ah, if I just enjoyed the advantages they have, I could really glorify God.'
Of course, most of us think we can only glorify God through our successes. It seems to have never occurred to us that we might glorify God through our failures and how we handle them.
We look at somebody else's life and think, 'Oh, if I had their blessings, how great I could be.'
We don't know that. That's our jealousy and envy talking.
If we keep utmost in our minds that we are put upon this earth to glorify God, then it may be that we can glorify God as easily through how we handle our failures as through what we could have done through our envisioned successes.
But we must understand the connection between our desires and how they eventuate in actions.
Misplaced desire warps our being and orients us away from God.

That great theologian Barney Fife spoke a helpful truth to guide us as we wrestle with the question, 'How do we keep from letting our desires remove God from mastery of our life?'
When we keep God's Word before us – when we do not covet! – heeding that counsel has a way of short-circuiting the process of rebellion against God.
"Do not covet," reminds us to disrupt the process of sin before it gains too much momentum within us.
As Barney Fife memorably reminded us, "Nip it in the bud!"
Keeping our thoughts oriented around the living God as opposed to focusing solely on satisfying our material aspirations has a way of "nipping in the bud," any disfiguring or destructive passion.

What is coveting at its base? Coveting is comparing.
Why do we covet? We covet because we compare our lives to those around us.
*We create some artificial standard in our mind as to what constitutes a successful life.
Then we see others around us as fulfilling that standard,*

while we see ourselves as being failures.

We think, 'My neighbor meets all the standards of achieving a successful life, while I do not.'
Then we begin to be resentful.

Our neighbor has done nothing to harm us. Yet we are resentful of his/her accomplishments and begin to erect walls of hatred between ourselves and them.

They have done nothing to harm us, but because we deem our neighbors as more adequately approaching the artificial standards of success that we have created, we come to covet their life.

What we do through our coveting is project our own insecurities.

We feel a deficiency between ourselves and somebody else,
and the gap separating their achievements from ours breeds a hatred within us.

We hear the commandment "Thou shalt not steal," and we understand the prohibition.

But we don't understand that to go through our existence aspiring to attain the life that somebody else enjoys is a form of stealing, too, an act that leads to estrangement between ourselves and others.

Yet if we removed from our thinking that artificial standard by which we have degraded our lives, then we could appreciate the achievements of others without feeling any corresponding envy.

If we could appreciate another's advancement without trying to use it as a standard of comparison to measure the success of our own lives,
we could relish their achievement without feeling jealous.

Let me demonstrate what I mean.

If I say the name "Joey Chestnut," most of you will not recognize the name.

Yet Joey Chestnut is wealthy. Joey Chestnut is famous. Joey Chestnut is a celebrity.

Joey Chestnut is the best in the world at what he does.

And how did he attain his lofty status?

By eating hot dogs.

On July the Fourth of this year, Joey Chestnut defended his Coney Island Hot Dog title by consuming 59 hot dogs (with buns) in ten minutes, plus another five dogs in overtime, to defeat the redoubtable former champ, Kobiachi.

Joey Chestnut makes a lot of money as a professional eater.

He enjoys fame and international renown. He is seen on ESPN.

Yet I doubt anybody in here who is not a teenaged boy really covets his talent or his rewards.

None of us covet Joey Chestnut's hot-dog eating abilities,
because we don't aspire to mirror his achievements.

His achievements cast no light upon our insecurities. We can applaud him. We can stand in awe of him.

But he has nothing that we really want, so he is not the object of our envy.

Covetousness is admiration coupled with avarice.

How do we avoid covetousness? Through a simple word: love.

When you truly love someone, when you love your neighbor as yourself, you cannot covet their attainments. In fact, you are glad for their success.

Ah, Dr. Kremer, you say, that is "pie in sky," theology. No it is not!

What parents in here who truly love their child,

would resent their child attaining a better job than the parents ever had?

What parents who truly love a child, would resent a child's great achievement or high attainment?

Such an accomplishment would fill loving parents with celebration,

even if the child far outstripped anything the parents had ever done.

Such parents would swell with pride and love! Pride and love -- not envy!

Love keeps one from coveting

That great source of theology, *It's a Wonderful Life*, demonstrates this point perfectly.

Remember how George Bailey's brother went off to war and became a hero, while, George, because of a physical handicap, was not able to serve? George's brother came back to the States to enjoy glory, acclaim, even a citation by the U.S. president. Crusty Mr. Potter, evil spider that he was, assumed that George must be eaten up with envy. He asked, "What does old slacker George have to say about his brother's acclaim?" Uncle Billy responded " "He only burst three buttons with pride." George loved his brother and could not be envious of his achievements, could not resent his attainments. Rather, love allowed him to relish the accomplishments of his brother without reservation. He did not covet. It would be safe to say that love for one's neighbor provides the key to keeping the Tenth Commandment.

Ten years ago this very month, some of you were with me in Jerusalem as we gazed down upon the southern corner of Herod's temple's retaining wall, a corner our guide said was known as Pinnacle Point, where tradition says Jesus was tempted by Satan. According to the Scriptures, Satan gave Jesus a glimpse of all the great kingdoms of the world and tempted him with the chance to rule them. This temptation must have had some resonance with Jesus, or it could not have been a temptation, but Jesus did not allow that impulse to become a desire, much less a deed. Instead, in that desperate moment, Jesus restated the First Commandment: "You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve." Elsewhere Jesus says, "Thou shalt worship the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength – and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself." That statement reveals that our Lord was the one who ultimately conjoined the First Commandment with the Tenth. If you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and if you will love your neighbor as you love yourself, then God will truly be your God – and you will not covet.

I remember that when I returned from the Holy Land I wrote a one-phrase summation of the entire region: *this is a land of covetousness.*

In the so-called Holy Land, every rock has been fought for, every plot bears human blood, every spit of land yields some story of conflict waged over property, water, prestige, power or right of way. When we were visiting there, there were no armed conflicts ongoing. Even so, one could feel the tensions. There is no peace in a region of covetousness. There is no peace in a community of covetousness. There is no peace in a heart of covetousness. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength – and love your neighbor as you love yourself. These are the First and the Last of the Ten Words God offers us for building a healthy world, a healthy community and a healthy life. They are wise words. Let us heed them, empowered by the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer
September 28, 2008
Eleventh in a Series