

Introduction

Today, we read the Ten Commandments and there's something we need to know. Their order isn't random. It's intentional. God put each one in its place for a reason, which raises an instructive question. Why did He put the one last that He put last? Consider two facts. One is that people tend to remember better what they see and hear first and last. The other is that first and last are unique positions – before and after everything else – and thus convey priority. Those two facts imply why God put the Commandment last that He did. It isn't because it's the least important commandment. It's because it is the most important, along with the First. If we keep the First and the Tenth, we'll naturally keep the Second through the Ninth as well. The Tenth is last, in other words, but not least. It's last and along with the First, most. It's imperative, therefore, that we understand it and live it out.

Wants

As are the other nine Commandments, the Tenth is straightforward and to the point, "**You shall not covet.**" The Hebrew word translated "**covet**" means "**desire**" or "**want.**" Verse 17 lists some of the things a typical Israelite, living in the Bronze Age, would want: house, spouse, servant, ox, and donkey. But what about us? What are the things we want? If I asked you to list the things, tangible or intangible, that you sincerely want, what would they be? My list would include a familiar friendship with Jesus, which I have, and a dry basement, which I don't.

Now, there isn't anything wrong with having wants. We see that in the Hebrew word translated "**covet.**" As I said, the word means "**want**" and it's a morally neutral word. In and of itself, in other words, it doesn't have a negative connotation. As long as the objects of our wants aren't immoral, those wants aren't necessarily wrong.

I feel sorry in fact for people who don't have any wants. I read about a young woman who had been born into a wealthy family. Yet, she

was a deeply troubled person who poured her heart out to her pastor. She told him how her parents had always bought her things even before she knew she wanted them. She then said: **“I have never wanted anything. I wish there was something that I wanted and couldn’t have. It must be exciting to want something, to have to wait for it, to dream that maybe someday I could have it, and then probably get it. But I’ve never had such an experience.”** Her comment illustrates that there’s nothing wrong with having wants. They aren’t unbiblical. On the contrary, wants that we strive and work to fulfill are a necessary, exciting, and motivating part of life. Parents need to keep that in mind and not indulge every want and whim of their children.

The Tenth Commandment isn’t about wanting. It’s about wanting gone wrong. That’s why our English Bibles translate the Hebrew word **“covet.”** Coveting is wanting gone wrong.

Envy Defined

This wanting gone wrong has another name. It’s **“envy.”** Let me quickly point out that when I say **“envy,”** I don’t mean **“jealousy.”** There is a distinction between the two that I don’t have time to define. Just know that the Tenth Commandment is about envy not jealousy.

Envy has three components. The first is the *subject*, which is a person who envies. The second is the *rival*, which is a person who is envied. The third is the *good*, which is a desirable possession, ability, achievement, or trait that the subject perceives the rival to have. In our text, verse 17, **“you”** is the subject, **“your neighbor,”** is the rival, and the **“house,” “wife,” “servant,” “ox,”** and **“donkey”** are the goods.

Envy occurs when we want a good – some possession, ability, achievement, or trait – that someone else has. But as I said, just wanting that isn’t in and of itself envy. Envy entails something more. Our wanting is accompanied by a destructive feeling. One psychologist calls this feeling **“botherment.”** Someone having a good that we want bothers or troubles us in some way.

But like all feelings, envy is syndrome of elements including thoughts, emotions, desires, motivations and even bodily movements. Individual episodes of envy can vary in those elements that are present and in the degree to which they are. But one or more of those elements are there. So, someone having a good that we want but don't have makes us feel discontented with a good we do have. Or it makes us feel inferior or insecure. Or it makes us wish he or she didn't have it. Or it compels us to diminish, destroy, or take it. Those are examples of botherment, which makes our wanting envy.

Years ago, I read that a college classmate and baseball teammate of mine founded a church in Florida that became a mega church. It troubled me that he did and I secretly wished that he hadn't. I immediately recognize how despicable that feeling was and I repented. But I had it nonetheless. I had envied his success.

What Envy Does

Now that we've defined envy, wanting that bothers us, let's examine what it does. It often acts. Remember what I said. It's a syndrome of elements that can include bodily movements and it often does. We don't just think, emote, or desire in other words, we often act as well to diminish, destroy, or take the good a person has. Most of us don't destroy or take, but we do sometimes diminish don't we? Chuck Swindoll identifies three of the practical ways we do so.

The first is what he calls the "**but**" approach. We point out what the ones we envy are not, do not have, or cannot do. Yes, he's brilliant but he has no common sense. Or yes, she's lovely but she has no personality. Or yes, he's charismatic but he's irresponsible as well.

There's a second way we diminish people we envy. It's the "**reversal**" approach. We cast a shadow over them by questioning their motives. He gives generously because he wants to impress people. Or he turns the other cheek because he's cowardly. Or she does so much for the PTA because she likes to control things.

We diminish people we envy in a third way. It's the "**unfavorable comparison**" approach. We minimize what they are, have, or do by stacking them up against someone better. Yes, she published some poetry but she's no Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Or yes, he's speaks well but he's no Billy Graham. Or yes, she cooks well but she's no Rachel Ray.

Those approaches illustrate that envy is an inner feeling that often expresses itself outwardly – in the three ways that Swindoll identifies and in others like dishonoring parents, killing, committing adultery, stealing, and bearing false witness. People usually break commandments Five through Nine, in other words, because they've broken the Tenth.

The result is that few things are as disruptive of personal and relational peace as envy is. It's the root of much of the striving in people's psychological and social lives. As the Roman poet Horace declared, "**Tyrants never invented a greater torment.**" That's what it does. It torments us. It makes us eat our hearts out as we say it.

What Envy Is

That's what envy does, which implies what it is. It's a sin pure and simple. Paul makes that clear in Romans 1:29. He identifies it as one of the traits of moral depravity. The church has historically condemned what it calls "**the seven deadly sins,**" the ones that are the most detrimental in their effects. Envy is one of those. J.M. Barrie said about it in fact that it "**is the most corroding of the vices.**" It's disgusts God and keeps us out of the flow of His presence, power, and grace.

But it isn't just a corroding sin. It's a challenging one as well to which we're all susceptible. The story is told of a desert monk whose reputation for holiness reached the very confines of hell itself. So the devil assigned his three most powerful demons to tempt him out of his holiness. When they reached the desert, the first planted the vision of great power in his mind. The monk's face remained serene. The second demon then planted the vision of great wealth in his mind. His face

remained serene. After that, the third demon planted the vision of great carnal pleasure in his mind. His face remained serene. Annoyed, the devil, pushed his demons aside and said, **“I’ll show you what never fails.”** He appeared to the monk, leaned over, and whispered in his ear: **“Have you heard the news? Your classmate Makarios has just been named bishop of Alexandria.”** With that, the monk’s face scowled.

That story teaches us that envy is perhaps the most insidious of all the temptations that followers of Jesus face. Philip Bailey wasn’t exaggerating when he called it **“a coal that comes hissing hot from hell.”**

Rejoice with Others

So, don’t envy others. Rejoice for them instead. That’s what Jesus calls His disciples and friends to do. Paul states it this way in Romans 12:15, **“Rejoice with those who rejoice.”** I came across a little tidbit that expresses it well, **“The true test of relationship is not how loyal we are when friends fail, but how thrilled we are when they succeed.”** That’s the implied positive side of the Tenth Commandment. It enjoins us to be thrilled not troubled when others eclipse us in what they are, have, or do. It enjoins us to root for that in fact.

John the Baptist is our model for this. Remember what he said in John 3:30 when many of his disciples left him to follow Jesus, **“He must increase.”** That’s the motto of the Tenth Commandment. Others must increase. It calls us to root for others to eclipse us and to rejoice when they do.

That is of course no small task. There is in fact no greater challenge in human life than doing that. It’s totally contrary to our nature in its fallen state, which is why the percentage of people who do it is miniscule. So, how do we do it? There’s only one way. Love God.

Let’s get down to the nitty gritty here. What is the foundational reason we envy people? The New Testament word for love is *agape*. It means to desire and pursue the well-being and joy of others over our

own. The implication is clear. The reason we envy when others rejoice is because we don't love them that way. And the reason we rejoice when others rejoice is because we do. I mentioned envying my successful college classmate. I recognized what it meant that I did. I desired my well-being and joy over his. I didn't love him. The moral is this. To keep the Tenth Commandment, we have to love people – agape.

But according to 1 John 4, we can love people that way only if we first of all love God that way. The First and the Tenth Commandments, in other words, are strongly linked to each other and to the Fifth through the Ninth. To not dishonor parents, kill, commit adultery, steal, and bear false witness, we must first of all not envy people but love them, which is the Tenth Commandment. And to not envy but love people, we must first of all not envy but love God, which is the First Commandment.

So, let's love God. We can you know. There is a sequence to loving Him that's rooted in His nature and ours. We understand Him, which enables us to routinely engage Him, which causes us to know Him, which causes us to love and also trust Him. Then, because we love and trust Him, we're willing and able to root for others to eclipse us and to rejoice when they do. I've written a study, *The First Aim*, that will help you learn and live out that sequence.

Conclusion

When I was a boy, we sang a song in Christian Endeavor that I'll never forget titled "Root Them Out." The first stanza goes like this: **"Root them out, get them gone. All the little bunnies in the field of corn. Envy, jealousy, malice and pride, these must never in my heart abide."** Notice the call to action here. Root out envy. Get it gone from our hearts and plant agape love for God and others in its place. That's the Tenth Commandment and we desperately need to keep it. Why? It's because if we keep it, along with the First, we'll keep the rest as well. There's no doubt about it. The Tenth Commandment is last but certainly not least.