

#2053

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"The Tenth Command"

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We have come in our study to the tenth and last of God's commands. It states, as recorded in Exodus 20:17, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's."

From several perspectives, this command is unique. First and obviously, it is the final command. As the tenth, it marks the end and the fulness of the whole of God's law. But one notes also that this command is certainly unique among the ten in that it speaks of that which involves the heart of man. The other commands treat what might be considered outward requirements. Those forbid stealing, murder, adultery, etc. This one speaks of coveting. Coveting is not an outward action, but an inward thought. Because of this different approach, one can conclude correctly that this command is meant to be a summary of the preceding ones, and, as it were, a cover or roof which completes the others. This command shows conclusively that the earlier commands involve more than outward acts. The outward act is obviously wrong, but also the sinful thought of the heart is condemned.

All of this emphasizes the fact that the law of God is very strict. We may not conclude that it is too strict. And in this day of great leniency, the church must remain faithful in proclaiming this law in the preaching of the gospel, and in insisting upon obedience in thankfulness to God for that deliverance which is accomplished through the cross of Jesus.

The tenth command forbids covetousness. There is a proper form of coveting. Scripture speaks of this in I Corinthians 12:31, "But covet earnestly the best gifts." Christ has obtained for His people the right of all spiritual blessings. His people have the right, then, to desire those gifts and seek them. But the command is not speaking of that good form of coveting. It is the evil coveting, so common among men, that is condemned. Coveting is that evil of desiring what another possesses. It is a desire for that for which we have no right. Involved in coveting is also the evil of jealousy and hate and envy. In one's heart there is the longing and desire to get what is the other's.

Because of covetousness, all manner of outward transgressions become seen. Among nations there is war and other troubles. Because of covetousness there is robbery, murder, stealing, divorce, envy, hatred. In short covetousness almost inevitably manifests itself in outward violations of God's commands.

The other commands seem to forbid outward actions. We have seen, in treating those, that more is involved. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, pointed out to His hearers that each command involves also obedience from the heart. Yet many insist that they obey God's commands because they do not outwardly transgress.

The tenth command points to the truth that obedience is from the heart. Lest any claim to have been obedient to the other commands because of outward observance, God lays down a principle in the tenth command which contradicts such superficial ideas about obedience. Obedience to the commands involves the heart. He Who commands, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," also commanded, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife." He Who said, "Thou shalt not steal" also commanded, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house." Simply stated, one may not transgress any of God's commands in thought. It is not enough to refrain from

the outward act of theft; one must not either desire what belongs to another. The law of God is strict indeed!

God's law reveals therefore that there may not even be the "smallest inclination or thought" contrary to the law within us. Ah, how often we are transgressors! How often sinful thoughts do cross our minds. How often we are jealous of another and desire what he has. How often adulterous thoughts enter the mind. How often we would, in our minds, kill another. How often we do make idols for ourselves in our minds. All of this--even the smallest thought contrary to God's law--is condemned. And rightly so.

But the command also has its positive aspect. The command requires perfect righteousness before God--not just outward observance, but perfect obedience from the heart. We are to hate sin about us--but also in us. The command reminds that one may never be comfortable with sin. Every transgression drives the child of God to his knees in prayer for mercy and forgiveness. There is the desire to serve God in every walk of life. We desire to obey God's law in our families, in our work, in our school, and when we seek our entertainment. That is the demand of this command. Do you observe it? Is there that kind of purity of heart within you? Do our sinful thoughts bother us--and cause us to cry for forgiveness?

The command does indeed expose us. None can claim perfection when this law confronts him. Not even the holiest of men on this earth observed the law perfectly. Each has his sinful deeds and thoughts. One thinks of King David of Judah. He is called in Scripture the "man after God's own heart." Yet this same David committed adultery and murder. For a time, he walked in impenitence. God brought David to a confession of sin and repentance thereof. So also one is reminded of the great apostle Peter. He is the one who denied his Lord three times--even though he had earlier maintained that he would never deny his Lord. But Jesus called him also to repentance. And such is the experience of every Christian. He has just a very small beginning of new obedience. He knows that he continues to break God's laws both in deed and in thought.

Some have claimed perfection on this earth. These like to quote from I John 3:9, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin." These would point to Noah who "walked with God." They want to insist that when Scripture demands, "Be ye holy as I the Lord your God am holy," that the child of God is capable of doing this--otherwise God would not ask it of us.

But this "perfectionism" of Christians on this earth is in reality an abhorrent doctrine. He who believes it does not understand well what sin is. Nor does such an one cry out for forgiveness--for he believes that there is nothing he has done which is wrong.

Rather, the child of God knows the truth of I John 1:8 which states, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." He recognizes in himself the reality of sin. He acknowledges that he has but a small beginning of new obedience. How then could he exalt himself above another? There is reason for humility and grief each day. Our sins rise up against us, prevailing daily. Our only hope is the mercy of God which we experience now through Christ our Lord.

The tenth command must never become the occasion for the Christian to "give up" on the law. One might be tempted to say, "I can't obey God's law anyway. I'm always transgressing. So why bother? Why not simply discard this law which is that strict that none can perfectly obey?"

But the Christian must rather desire to obey because our God requires this of him. He confesses his salvation in Christ. He acknowledges the work of regeneration and conversion in him. Then he desires to obey as a fruit of that great and glorious work of Christ within him. He desires not only to conform to that law outwardly, but from the heart. Knowing the seriousness and comprehensiveness of sin, he desires to flee from all of this. From the heart, he would love God and the neighbor. That is the wonderful fruit of salvation. The saved Christian is not careless, but very serious in his walk. He would begin to serve God from the heart--even as he shall serve Him perfectly finally in heaven.

Not only is the individual Christian to be concerned with obedience to this law, but surely the Church of Christ must also insist on proper obedience. The church, of course, must preach the cross. It presents the glorious truth that the blood of Christ pays for the sins of God's people. But that church cannot ignore the law as though God no longer requires obedience. Though Christ fulfilled the demands of the law, though He bore the punishment of God for our transgression of the law, still the demands of the law remain. Now, however, the law serves to guide the saved Christian in a life of proper thankfulness. And this is what the church must teach.

There are reasons, of course, why many churches and preachers do not want to preach the demands of God's law. Churches do not seem to grow when the preacher is too strict in setting forth what God demands. We live in an age in which each prizes his "liberty" and insists upon his "rights." One must have the "right" of abortion; the "right" to be a practicing homosexual; the "right" to divorce and remarry. Few seem willing to affiliate with that church which reminds us what is sin in God's sight--and what God expects and demands of Christians.

Secondly, strict preaching of this law of God will "step on another's toes." People will be offended. The preacher might be of a mind to avoid this. He must keep his friends and avoid trouble.

Then too, strict preaching of this law does not seem to change people anyway. The preacher might point to sins--violations of God's law--but people continue to walk in those sins anyway. So then, why bother being too strict when preaching the Word of God?

But the Church, if it is faithful, must properly proclaim God's Word--including the ten commandments. It must be strictly maintained because God requires this of us. He who refuses to maintain or teach the law, refuses to obey God. One may not subtract from that law nor add to it. One must not alter the law in order to please men. The law of God must be set forth in simplicity and truth. God says, "Be ye holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."

That kind of strict preaching is most profitable for the Christian. He must want it--and belong to such a church where that preaching is heard. And why should he profit--and how?

First, when the law of God is set forth, the child of God learns increasingly of his own sinful nature. The law does not allow the hearer to remain comfortably seated in his pew. It disturbs him. It

renders him inexcusable. It makes him aware of the fact that he is a terrible sinner. It points him to the fact that his salvation is never, never his own work.

And such knowledge is truly profitable for the Christian. He seeks earnestly then the forgiveness of sins. The knowledge of his sins drives him to his knees. If he knew not the greatness of his transgressions, he would not cry out for forgiveness either. So he must know and understand his own sins--that he may also ask for mercy of God.

That is not all, however. In the knowledge of our sinfulness, we will also pray for the grace of the Holy Spirit. The Christian needs the life of Christ applied to him. He needs the guidance of the Spirit to walk properly in this earth. He must know his own sin in order to understand this deep dependence upon God's guidance.

Thus does the Christian begin to walk in holiness before God, in gratitude and thankfulness to Him for what Christ has accomplished. Increasingly, he is fashioned in the image of God: true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. He knows the law--and wants to observe it now, though it be still in much imperfection. The child of God loves God and the neighbor, which is manifested both in his walk and in his conversation. But also, that love proceeds from a regenerated heart. It is a love which is not simply external, but from within.

Finally, the preaching of the truths of the law serve as constant reminder of the glory that shall be. All too often one becomes satisfied with the status quo. But the law reminds of the greatness of transgressions every day. Then, in the hearts of Christians, there is the longing and desire for the heavenly. Then they shall be able to serve God perfectly and without any sin. There is the longing for that day when righteousness abounds.

Do you too love God's law? In gratitude to God for Christ's work of saving His people, do you seek to obey it? Then you too will desire the day when we shall honor and serve God according to the principle of His law in all perfection.

In conclusion, I would offer to you again a set of cassette recordings on the past ten messages on the law of God. There is no charge, although we appreciate any contribution toward defraying costs of cassette and handling. Write to the Reformed Witness Hour, Box 1230, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 49501.

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