

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Trinity, November 13, 2016

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 369, 287:10, 196, 398, 521:1-2.

Lessons: 1 Kings 21:1-25, Romans 7:7-25, Matthew 6:25-34.

Sermon Text: Exodus 20:17.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Covet is not a word we use every day. We know the word, but does it really make an impression on our daily living? We find the word in the 9th and 10th Commandments: “**You shall not covet your neighbor’s house.** *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God that we do not scheme to get our neighbor’s inheritance or house, or obtain it by a show of right, but do all we can to help him keep it.” **You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, workers, animals, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.** *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God that we do not force or entice away our neighbor’s spouse, workers, or animals, but urge them to stay and do their duty.”

Does the word have any relevance to our daily living? The real answer is “yes”. So what does it mean to covet, especially when God says

THOU SHALT NOT COVET.

- 1. God forbids sinful desires and thoughts,**
- 2. And demands helping our neighbor.**

When God says “Thou shalt not” he is, in a sense, pounding his fist and saying don’t do it! And God says it under penalty of punishment, in this case, eternal punishment in the fires of hell.

God gives us two commandments using the word “covet”: Do not covet your neighbor’s property, the inanimate things that are not living, and do not covet any of the living things that belong to your neighbor. And, of course, “neighbor” doesn’t just mean the people who live next door to us. Neighbor means all people. God is protecting people and possessions which he has given us. These commandments safeguard a place to live and service which we receive from others.

We usually hear the word “covet” with a negative flavor. But in itself, coveting is not wrong. It all depends on what we covet. God tells us in Scripture that we should covet spiritual gifts and the Word of God and the kingdom of God. We may also covet things that are not forbidden to us, such as wisdom, knowledge, ability, and skills. But we must not sinfully covet things that are forbidden to us, as Eve lusted after the forbidden fruit, or things which are not intended for us. In short, God forbids sinful coveting, that is, having a sinful desire for anything that belongs to our neighbor.

Just so we don’t think that an outward compliance with the letter of the Ten Commandments is sufficient, God in the last two Commandments points particularly to the heart, and demands that our hearts be holy and free of every evil lust. To covet as the word is used here, means to lust after, to have a sinful desire or a craving in our hearts for something we should not want to have.

God is impressing on us that he knows and condemns not only our sinful words and actions but also our sinful thoughts. He is striking at the heart, where the sin of coveting begins.

We may desire and seek to get our neighbor's inheritance or house in a right and lawful way, such as purchase for a fair price in an honest way. But if we cannot get it in an honest way, we must no longer desire it in our hearts, as wicked king Ahab did when Naboth did not want to part with his vineyard. Among the Jews,

land and houses were normally obtained only by inheritance. In Luther's day in Germany, few people owned their homes. And so Luther added the word "inheritance" in his discussion of the Ninth Commandment.

Such sinful desires will tempt us to sin also in word or action, and attempt us to scheme to get another person's property or house by trickery or obtain it by a show of right. Such sinful desires will tempt us to entice or force away another person's spouse, workers, or animals.

God warns through the prophet Micah: ***"Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance."*** Micah 2:1-2 (NIV) "Show of right" refers to all manner of legal but loveless practices by which one person may take away another's property of any kind or value, trying to make it look right.

To have and to nurse such lust is sin, and if we do not suppress it by contrition and repentance, it will become so strong as to lead us to sinful deeds. We must watch our hearts!

When we look at the Tenth Commandment, we see that God is addressing the animate, living things that belong to our neighbor. Such covetousness will move us to try to get our neighbor's wife, servants, or cattle away from him. We must not estrange, entice or force away from our neighbor his wife, servants, or animals, but urge them to stay and do their duty.

What does God require of us in these two commandments?

God requires only holy desires. God wants us to have only pure and holy desires in our hearts, which will lead us to do all we can to help another person keep his property and house and to lead us to urge another person's spouse, workers, or animals to stay and do their duty.

As we seek to live these commandments, we must realize that God demands a pure heart. So in practice this means that we will help our neighbor in finding and keeping a place to live.

Whenever our neighbor's wife, children, servants, friends are dissatisfied with him and complain to us about him, and even think about leaving him, we should not support and encourage them, but urge and persuade them to stay with him and do their duty. Paul did this when he returned the runaway slave Onesimus to his master, Philemon, whom, at the same time, he admonished to treat the servant as a brother in Christ. Read the letter to Philemon for more of this history.

God requires a heart of such perfect love that it delights in him and in his commandments and never desires the neighbor's harm, but seeks only his welfare.

God impresses upon us that in his sight evil desire, or lust, is indeed sin and deserves condemnation. God impresses upon us that we should not have any evil lust whatsoever in our hearts, but only holy desires and love of God and of all that is good. ***"Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy."*** Leviticus 19:2 (KJV) Because God made man holy and perfect, he demands that we should be holy and that we have no evil lust whatsoever in our hearts,

Because evil lusts arise in our hearts, men generally do not regard them as sins. Paul knew there was lust in his heart. He wrote ***"For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet.'"*** Romans 7:7 (NIV) We must not feed these lusts or trifle with them, for they will lead us to sinful words and deeds, and these, too, will bring forth death.

How can we guard against covetousness? By asking God to make us content with what we have, by wishing our neighbor every blessing, and by helping him to keep what is his.

In the First and the last Commandments God claims our heart. In the First he demands that from the heart we fear, love, and trust in him alone. In the last he forbids that there be any evil thought and desire in our heart.

What will such sinful desire move us to do?

Someone who covets will often seek to get what he covets. We must not seek to get it craftily, by some dishonest scheme or trick. Although we may not succeed at that, yet the very fact that we tried is a sin. This sin is aggravated when we actually obtain it by a show of right, as Ahab obtained Naboth's vineyard. Land sharks foreclose mortgages or pay delinquent taxes to obtain houses and farms far below their actual worth. To this day 'widows' houses are devoured' by swindling them out of their property. The word 'scam' is often used. Because people love money and want to be rich, they covet what is not theirs, and thus fall into the temptation of

wrongfully seeking to obtain what belongs to others. The commandment can also be broken by forcing away, not by physical force as in robbery, but by words, to pressure someone with our requests so that he finally lets us have what we want, to ‘talk him into something’ against his will, to use undue pressure, to bulldoze him into giving up what is his. To entice away means to win his wife, servants, friends by gifts and promises, by favors and flatteries, so that they leave him and come to us. All such and similar things we do, because we are covetous.

Notice how Paul addresses covetousness with Timothy: ***“But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”*** 1 Timothy 6:6-10 (NIV) Notice how coveting can even lead to loss of faith! God here teaches us always to be content with everything in our lives so that we do not covet anything that belongs to our neighbor.

Such holy desires will move us to help our neighbor and be of service to him in keeping his inheritance or house. We want to encourage each other to give the full service we owe to others. On judgment day, Jesus will tell believers: ***“I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”*** Matthew 25:40 (NIV)

If we truly love our neighbor, we will rejoice in his prosperity, look after his interests, and take care of his things as though they were our own, so that he may keep and enjoy them.

Such things as mentioned in the Tenth Commandment are examples of things which the sinful heart covets.

While in the Ninth Commandment a single object, the ‘neighbor's house and inheritance’, is mentioned, a number of objects are mentioned in the Tenth Commandment, including ‘anything that is thy neighbor's’. While coveting any of these things is an actual lust, this Commandment strikes at the root of all these individual lusts, namely covetousness, which is not an action or a deed, but a condition of the heart.

Christ says ***“Beware of covetousness”***. ***Luke 12:15 (KJV)*** This covetousness and selfishness is a part of our old Adam. These Commandments condemn us not only for the sins that we do, but also for what we are by nature. This is called original sin, inherited sin. Actually doing or committing sin is called actual sin.

Covetousness leads us to estrange from our neighbor his wife, children, servants, friends; to cause them to feel and to act as strangers to him, to alienate their affection, so that they no longer love and trust in him.

What must we admit as we examine ourselves in the light of these holy Commandments of God? We’ve broken these commandments too, and only deserve temporal death and eternal damnation. These commandments show us our sins because we have sinful desires or cravings for something we should not want to have.

Jesus saved us by keeping the Ninth and Tenth Commandments, too, perfectly, and dying as a sacrifice of all our sins.

As a guide or a guideline, these commandments teach us what is pleasing to God. The Gospel of Christ then becomes the motivation and reason for doing, saying, and thinking only what is pleasing to God. May we every day beat down sinful lusts in our hearts, so that all our being and life pleases God! Amen.