

What Not to Want

Exodus 20:17



Do Not Covet

Read Exodus 20:17: The tenth commandment says, “You shall not covet¹ your neighbor’s house [including his wife, servants, and property].² (20:17a). The tenth commandment concerns wrong desire and points back to the previous commandments.

What We Desire

The original words translated “covet” are generally neutral.³ Desire is not bad in itself. God designed human beings to desire.⁴ Of course, some of our desires are strong desires.

1. What kinds of things do people strongly desire? Consider daily desires and long term desires.⁵

Wrong Desire

While desire is not bad in itself, humans tend to have wrong desires.



2. What is wrong with the desires mentioned in the tenth commandment?⁶ (*Exodus 20:17*)

The tenth commandment points back to previous commandments. For example, coveting our neighbor’s property can lead to stealing. Coveting our neighbor’s wife can lead to adultery, and is “adultery in the heart” according to Jesus (*Matthew 5:27-28*).

But wrong desire is not limited to desiring our neighbor’s wife and possessions. More generally, “to [wrongly] covet” means “to seek for something, someone, some position, some recognition or some pleasure that is not in the will of God.”⁷

3. How can we know which desires are “not in the will of God?” What are the characteristics of wrong desire?

¹ ‘covet’ (*hāmad*) – in this context, “‘desire, yearn for, ...lust after’ someone or something, specifically for one’s own use or gratification” (John I. Durham, *Exodus* [Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987], 297).

² ‘house’ (*bayit*) – in this context, ‘house’ is comprehensive, including the ‘neighbor’s’ family and property (Durham, 299). It refers to his ‘household’ or whatever is in his house.

³ Hebrew *hāmad* and Greek *epithymia* can refer to either good desire or bad desire depending on the context.

⁴ Buddhism says desire is bad; it is the cause of suffering. Thus if we eliminate all desire, we will be freed from suffering. We would also cease to be human! God has designed us with desires for good reasons. For example, if we did not desire food, we would starve to death. If we did not desire sex, we would be extinct!

⁵ In this academic environment, many greatly desire knowledge, grades, degrees, credentials, careers, prestige, power, money, material possessions, etc. Long term desires may include fulfilling relationships (e.g., marriage). On a daily basis, we might greatly desire pleasure, comfort, happiness, peace, love, attention, recognition, control, etc.

⁶ Desiring a wife, servants, animals, and property is not necessarily bad, but coveting our *neighbor’s* wife, servants, animals, and property is wrong. We must not desire and seek after things that are not ours to have.

⁷ Robertson McQuilkin, *Biblical Ethics* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1995), 100.

- 📖 “Those who live according to the flesh⁸ have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.” (*Romans 8:5, NIV*)
- 📖 *Jesus was asked, “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matthew 22:36-39, NIV)*
- 📖 “Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” (*Psalms 37:4*)⁹

Our desires are wrong when the object desired is prohibited by God, when our motivations are self-centered as opposed to God-centered, or when we seek to fulfill our desires in the wrong way. Our desires are wrong when they are not consistent with loving God with all our being. To truly know which desires are right and wrong, we need to know God.¹⁰

4. Why do we covet? Why do we have wrong desires? What results from coveting?¹¹

Not Coveting

5. God says, “You shall not covet.” How can we obey God’s command? How can we “put to death...evil desire and covetousness” in our own lives? (*Col. 3:5, ESV*)¹² Be specific.

Paul confessed his struggle with sin and “every kind of covetous desire” (*Romans 7:7-23*), and said, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (*7:24*). He answered himself, “Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (*7:25*) First we need salvation and *new life* in Christ, including a new heart and the power of the Spirit.¹³

As God’s people, we need to “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness,” and trust in Him (*Matt. 6:33-34*). We need to love God and love our neighbor (*Matt. 22:37-40; Romans 13:9-10*). We need to be thankful, content,¹⁴ and generous toward others, by God’s grace.

Reflection/Application

- What do you desire and seek? Are your desires “in the will of God”? Are they consistent with loving God with all your being? Ask God to help you apply this lesson to your life.

⁸ ‘flesh’ (Greek *sarx*) – In this context, ‘flesh’ generally refers to fallen humanity in rebellion against God. Desires according to the flesh are basically self-centered and this-worldly. Desires according to the Spirit are God-centered and kingdom-of-God oriented.

⁹ If our greatest desire is to know, love, and glorify God, all of our desires should fall into proper order.

¹⁰ Nonbelievers can read the Bible and learn much about what is right and wrong according to the Bible, and they can be convicted of sin by God’s grace. But they are limited. As Paul wrote, ‘the person without the Spirit... does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God...and cannot understand them, because they are discerned only through the Spirit’ (see 1 Corinthians 2:10-15). We cannot live in accordance with the Spirit unless the Spirit lives in us (*Romans 8:5, 9*), and only those who ‘belong to Christ’ (through faith) are indwelt by the Spirit (*8:9*).

¹¹ The root problem is ‘sin’ – that is, any attitude or action that is opposed to God’s authority and moral will. ‘All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (*Romans 3:23*). Sin infects the heart, and alienates us from God. Coveting (in the bad sense) deserves God’s judgment (*Ephesians 5:5*). Coveting is dangerous and destructive. For example, ‘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 6:10*)

¹² In this verse, Paul uses both *epithymian kakēn* (‘evil desire’) and *pleonexia* (‘covetousness’ or ‘greed’).

¹³ Through faith in Christ, we receive this new life, which is necessary to put covetousness ‘to death’ (*Col. 3:1-10*).

¹⁴ Concerning contentment, read *Philippians 4:10-13*; *1 Timothy 6:6-10*; *Hebrews 13:5*; and *Matthew 6:25-34*.