

The Tenth Commandment: “The Deadly Sin of Envy”

Mark 15:1-10

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“You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.” It’s a politically incorrect list by today’s standards, because we no longer imagine that slaves or wives could be property. But there it is, the tenth command.

The English word “covet” is derived, ultimately, from the Latin *cupere*, which means, “to long for, or desire.” We don’t use the word covet much, anymore, though. That’s because “coveting” has a bad rap since it is used pejoratively in the tenth command, and we have a cultural memory of that. By erasing the word coveting from our common vocabulary, we think we’ve erased the thing itself. However, we use another word, instead—the word envy.

Envy, like coveting, is longing for, or desiring something that doesn’t belong to you—only, envy isn’t always directed at things, like cars, jewelry, or clothing. You can also be envious for human qualities like honour, kindness, or success that other people have, but we want for ourselves. Take, for example, the case of Jesus and the chief priests, the rulers of Israel who, as we learned from our scripture, envied Jesus.

The chief priests know that Jesus is good, but Jesus is also a threat to their status, to their pragmatic leadership, and to the people’s affection for them. The leaders envy Jesus’ star quality. The leaders envy Jesus’ success with the people. So the chief priests hang onto Jesus’ every word, like vultures waiting, yearning, churning, burning until Jesus’ light can be extinguished so that they can have it back for themselves. They try to trip him up. "O Jesus, good teacher, why do your disciples break the Sabbath laws? Is divorce lawful? Should we pay taxes to Rome? Jesus, by what authority do you do these things?"

You see, hopeless Israelites have turned to Jesus in droves, because he teaches that the good of the Kingdom of God is already in them. Tax collectors and prostitutes painfully, slowly, but surely give up their evil ways when Jesus says so. Jesus teaches a path of love and nonviolent resistance that gives common people the ability to stand up and be proud even though their land is occupied by the violent Roman army.

But the leaders cannot stand this. Jesus’ vision means the end to their own petty kingdoms, their power and their perks. So, the leaders bring Jesus to Pilate, hoping that their trumped up charges against Jesus will lead to his execution.

Pilate, of course, immediately recognizes that the leaders are motivated by envy. So, to get Jesus off the hook, Pilate offers the chief priests a deal. He suggests a choice. The leaders of the people can have either Jesus' good, or the criminal Barabbas' evil.

But the leaders of the people are so envious of the good that Jesus has, and that they lack, that the leaders choose to release Barabbas rather than Jesus. They get the crowds to shout what amounts to, "Give us death and destruction, give us robbery and thievery, but do not give us Jesus. Give us Barabbas, crucify Jesus."

And here is the terrible, ultimate consequence of envy. Envy makes us strike out at the person who has the good thing, in order, somehow, to deprive him or her of its use or pleasure. Envy finds no pleasure in another's good—whether that is good stuff or personal virtue—envy finds no pleasure in another's good if envy cannot also have it for itself.

The Bible is full of stories about envious people who strike out. Cain killed Abel because Cain envied Abel's rapport with God. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery because they envied his relationship with their father Jacob. Daniel's exceptional qualities made other Persian administrators envious of him, so they hatched a plan to have the lions eat Daniel. The striking out that goes with envy, though, doesn't usually end in murder. More commonly, envy adds up to malignant scowls, petty unkindness, and smoldering hatreds that ruin community. So, for example, while the angels in heaven partied on account of the repentance of the prodigal son, the older brother will not join in joy, but scowls and stew and storms off by himself instead. He envies his brother, and his father's magnanimous ability to forgive.

Fairy-tales also touch on envy and the way it strikes out at others. For example Cinderella is a matchless beauty with a precious heart. Her ugly stepmother and sisters, however, envy Cinderella's beauty and spirit. What the stepmother and the step-sisters do, then, is strike out at Cinderella. They work her to death and hide her from the world by not letting her attend the ball. Again, this is the ugliness of envy; it cannot stand it when someone else has something good or beautiful or virtuous. Envy makes us strike out at the person who has the good thing, in order, somehow, to deprive them of its use or pleasure.

Envy is ugly because it destroys, as the stepmother sought to destroy Cinderella, or as the chief priests sought to destroy Jesus. But there is another reason why envy is ugly. You see, unlike other sins, envy never feels good. For example, pride offers a moment of self-satisfaction and gluttony a contented burp. Envy, though, never gives satisfaction. It is a dull, gnawing, thud, thud sort of deadly sin that takes away our pleasure for even the simple things that are best in life.

Life becomes dull and grey because the envious person can't appreciate what is unique and wonderful for others; envy cannot admire, respect, or give thanks for what is nobler or lovelier or greater than itself. A life full of envy is just one grey sidewalk slab after another.

In the end, envy is one of the traditional seven *deadly* sins because it does not allow us to enjoy life. Envy robs us of the great good that the tenth commandment is trying to protect. That

great good is contentment. And rather than give you a systematic theology of contentment, let me tell you a story.

It's like this. Once upon a time there lived a cobbler who was a happy and contented man. People who passed his shop laughed and smiled to hear him singing at the top of his voice while fixing shoes. Many people stopped in his shop to bask in the warmth of his smile.

One of the people who observed the cobbler was a banker who sang little and smiled less. He seldom slept well. At first he was irritated by the constant good humour of the cobbler, but as the days passed he was attracted to the man. Finally he decided to visit the cobbler and discover his secret of happiness.

After the two men talked for a while, the banker inquired, "Are you wealthy? Pardon me for asking, but how much money do you make each year?"

"Most days, my family has just enough," the cobbler answered. "Some days I only fix shoes and no one buys. The shop is also closed on Sundays and on all the Holy Days, so there is no income at all when we celebrate Christmas or Easter. Still, we have enough. But I'm sorry; I can't tell you how much money I make each year. I just don't know. I've never added it up."

"How wonderfully simple," the banker said. "I have decided to eliminate your financial problems for the immediate future since you have so openly shared your life story with me. Take this gift of 300 gold coins and use them whenever you have need."

Overjoyed, the cobbler quickly went home and buried the gold in a corner of his house. The succeeding days brought many changes. He often left the shop to go home when the family was absent, thinking that someone might come when they were gone and steal his wealth. He began to lose sleep at night because he feared that people were plotting to steal the gold. Old friends noticed that he did not sing with the same cheer, and he often seemed suspicious when someone stopped in the shop just to chat.

The cobbler was neither happy nor contented. But he was wise enough to realize this. And so after thinking it all through, the cobbler visited the banker with the bag of gold in his hands. "Thank you for your generous gift," he began, "but I cannot really afford to be the owner of these gold coins. Please take your money back so that I may again enjoy music, sleep, and my friends. It seems that when I took your money, you unwittingly took my contentment at the same time."

Do not covet your neighbour's good name, your neighbour's wealth, your neighbour's beauty or spirit or success. Covet these things and you are bound to strike out and hurt someone, if only yourself, your peace, in order to achieve what you covet. Instead, if you have enough, practice contentment, the spiritual discipline of giving thanks for what you have, while refusing to spend your life trying to acquire what others already have.