

THE KEY TO THE COMMANDMENTS

Scriptures: James 4:1-10; Philippians 4:4-9

The tenth commandment is different than all the others. All the other commandments deal with actions: murder, theft, lying, committing adultery, worshiping idols. All the other commandments describe observable behavior—things we can supposedly control. But the last commandment is different. The tenth commandment prohibits thoughts and feelings. According to the tenth commandment it is not enough to avoid committing adultery with your neighbor's wife; you can't even want to. It's not enough that you refrain from stealing your neighbor's house or your neighbor's car; you can't even wish they were yours.

Is that realistic? Is it really possible to control the way we think and feel?

When my children were young they would on occasion wake up in the middle of the night after a bad dream. Then they would come into our bedroom and say, "I'm scared." I responded, of course, with great pastoral sensitivity. I said, "There's nothing to be scared of. Quit worrying and go back to bed." Of course that did not work. It does not even work for me. Now that my children are older, I'm the one waking up in the middle of the night worrying about them. I tell myself, "They are fine. Quit worrying and go to sleep." But it does not work. You cannot turn off your thoughts and shut off your feelings like a faucet.

The problem is that our thoughts and feelings shape our actions. That is the point James makes in our first scripture lesson. At the beginning of chapter 4 James says,

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.

Have you ever watched two young children in a room full of toys and seen one of them walk over or crawl over and grab a toy from the other child? It all starts with coveting—wanting something that someone else has.

Last July on *60 Minutes* Morley Safer conducted a jailhouse interview with Dennis Kozlowski, the former CEO of Tyco International. At one point during his tenure as CEO Kozlowski made over \$100 million a year in legal compensation. And yet for Kozlowski it wasn't enough. On top of his \$100 million a year, Kozlowski took hundreds of millions of dollars in secret unauthorized payments and interest free loans that were hidden from Tyco shareholders and even from some of the directors. Why would someone earning \$100 million a year need to steal another \$400 million from the company that was paying him? The interview was quite revealing about that question. Morley Safer asked him what it was like to earn that kind of money: \$100 million a year. Kozlowski said, "It's a way of keeping score, I guess." In other words, it was a competition. Keeping score meant keeping up with others among the super-rich, which for Kozlowski included a \$30 million mansion in Florida, a \$16 million yacht, a \$2 million birthday party for his wife including a live performance by Jimmy Buffett, and a

\$19 million apartment in New York that was furnished with—get this—a \$6,000 shower curtain (*60 Minutes*, July 29, 2007).

How does a person who legally earned \$100 million a year end up stealing? The answer is coveting, wanting what others have. Coveting is progressive, or perhaps I should say addictive. It takes ever larger amounts to bring satisfaction, and even then the satisfaction is tied to how much more or less we have than others.

Coveting is not only the last of the Ten Commandments, it is the key to the commandments. That is James' point. Conflicts, disputes, stealing, lying, even adultery—these things ultimately come from greed, and greed is not something against which you can pass a law.

So what do we do? Now let's turn to our second scripture lesson: Philippians 4, beginning at verse 4. The apostle Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." All through this sermon series on the Ten Commandments I have stressed that each of the negative commandments has a positive opposite. The opposite of killing is caring, the opposite of stealing is sharing, the opposite of adultery is faithfulness, and the opposite of bearing false witness is speaking the truth in love. But what is the opposite of coveting? What is the opposite of greed? The opposite of greed is gratitude. The opposite of coveting what other people have is to be thankful for what you have—to rejoice in God's gifts to you every day.

I have mentioned before a little book called *Craddock Stories*. These are sermon stories told by Fred Craddock, a well known preacher from Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. He tells about a classmate of his from years ago who was a missionary in China and placed under house arrest during the Communist takeover. After a period of time confined to their home, some soldiers came to him and his family and said, "You can return to America now, but you can only take with you two hundred pounds." So they got a scale, and the missionary, his wife, and his two children began to weigh different items and argue about what to take. "We must have this vase. Well, this is a new typewriter. But what about my books? What about this? What about that?" They weighed everything, argued about what they would take, and finally right on the dot they had 200 pounds. Then the soldiers came and asked, "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes," they said.

"Did you weigh everything?" the soldiers asked.

"Yes."

"Did you weigh the kids?"

The missionary and his wife stopped in their tracks. "No, we didn't weigh the kids."

The soldiers said, "Weigh the kids."

And suddenly everything else, the typewriter, the vase, the books—it all became trash (*Craddock Stories*, pp. 22-23). All the things they had argued about, all the things they had fought over in order to keep and take with them—they forgot about all that in their gratitude that their two young scrawny children together weighed less than two hundred pounds.

You see, gratitude can change your perspective on things, especially the things you don't have. If you learn to be grateful for what you have, you are not compelled to steal to get more. If you learn to be grateful for your husband or wife, imperfect as they are, you don't need to lust

after another one. If you grateful for who God made you, you do not need to build yourself up by putting others down, by bearing false witness against them. If you rejoice in the Lord always, you don't need to go looking for another god.

Coveting is the poison that causes you to break the commandments. Gratitude is the antidote that makes it possible to keep them.

Let me close with one more story. Several years ago Steve Moulton, the editor of a Presbyterian news publication, printed a letter he received from his 93 year-old aunt shortly before Thanksgiving. His aunt, named Agnes, was living in a nursing home. In this letter you will hear whispers of her sadness: how she wishes that she was in her home again and with her husband and surrounded by family and friends. In a sense what you will hear is coveting, wishing that she had the things other people had, the things she herself formerly had. But also in this letter you will hear something else, something that helps her deal with all these feelings. Here is the letter from Aunt Agnes to her nephew Steve:

Dear Stevie: Thanksgiving is coming again, and you know how hard it is for me. Uncle Charlie died the day after Thanksgiving—gosh, I can't even remember when. Remember Uncle Charlie—how he used to bounce you on his knee and toss you in the air? I really miss Charlie.

I shouldn't complain. I have a lot to be thankful for. My roommate Emma—remember Emma, the one with the disastrous purple nightgown with orange polka dots? I'm thankful her hearing isn't too good, so I can watch TV late at night. I don't sleep well anymore. Hard to get tired around here. Maybe if more of the family came and wore me out, I might sleep better.

I am thankful, though, that I have a roof over my head and food to eat, although I can't eat like I use to. Sure miss having a kitchen and cooking for the family. Now that was living.

I'm thankful, too, for the staff here in the nursing home. Really quite helpful and friendly. June is always smiling and full of jokes, although I don't understand half of them. I guess I'm getting a little slow. Happens when you turn 93.

I'm really looking forward to Thanksgiving Day. You know how I love turkey and sweet potatoes. Hard to chew with these loose dentures, you know. Now, that pumpkin pie is always so soft and easy to eat. I love it piled high with that whipped cream.

Most of all, I like the church youth group that comes, sings and performs for us. They are such sweet young'uns, so full of energy and life. Makes this place come alive for a while.

I'm most thankful for God, as God is always with me no matter how lonely I feel. I don't have to wait for God to come visit me on occasion. God never stays an hour or so and then goes home. God keeps me company and helps the sadness of knowing that I will never go back home again.

Well, I've rattled on long enough. You have a great Thanksgiving with all the trimmings, and think of me from time to time. I'm thankful you are there and are okay. God bless.

Coveting—always wishing for what you don't have—can make your life miserable. Gratitude can make it a blessing. That's the key to the commandments.

– Ken Onstot
November 11, 2007