

## Ten Commandments

### Lesson 11 Article

Coveting (*hmd*)<sup>73</sup> is desiring—wanting or craving something. The commandment does not say “do not covet,” which would make no sense since much coveting is permissible or even commendable as long as the thing being coveted is something a person *should* desire and not something that already belongs to someone else exclusively (cf. e.g., coveting [desiring] something as perfectly proper as oak trees, Isa 1:29, or coveting [desiring] something as wonderfully proper as the Messiah, Isa 53:2; the verb is used of God’s own coveting [desiring] of Mount Zion in Ps 68:16). Therefore the commandment is necessarily worded with objects for the verb “covet,” these objects being things that one should not desire because they already belong to someone else.<sup>74</sup> “House” can as easily be translated “family and property”;<sup>75</sup> other objects forbidden to covet are someone else’s spouse, servants, animals, or “anything that belongs to your neighbor.” Although some traditions have separated this commandment into two (coveting a neighbor’s “house” as separate from coveting a neighbor’s wife), there appears to be no cogent reason for this division. The entire verse is a prohibition against any sort of coveting of what someone else already rightfully has, with enough examples given as to leave no doubt that nothing properly owned by someone else can be coveted. Again the principle of paradigmatic law applies: from the list any reasonable person can extrapolate to all other instances of things that cannot be coveted. This commandment, like the prohibition against stealing, implies that God allows people to own things that belong to them and not to others.

Although it may seem to be belaboring the obvious to say so, the final commandment insists that God’s covenant people realize that wishing to have good and proper things is good but that wishing to have the wrong things is bad. What people wish for has a major role to play in what kind of society they will create.<sup>77</sup> People able to curtail their wishing, so that it is limited to things they *should* desire, are people who contribute good to a society; those who want what they cannot properly have undermine a society’s moral fiber. The commandment has no penalty attached; improper coveting is hardly enforceable by human beings. God here calls for his people to take an approach to their neighbors<sup>78</sup> that respects them and their possessions—an approach they must voluntarily agree to if they want to please him. Coveting is the

---

<sup>73</sup> The root **חמד** carries the sense of “desiring” in all its forms and conjugations, although various synonyms may be found in translation, such as “crave,” “find pleasure in,” “love,” “be precious.”

<sup>74</sup> W. L. Moran, “The Conclusion of the Decalogue (Ex 20, 17=Dt 5, 21),” *CBQ* 29 (1967): 543–54.

<sup>75</sup> In the OT the most common meaning statistically for **בית** is “place,” followed by “family,” and thereafter by “house” in the sense of “the building someone lives in.”

<sup>77</sup> See L. Smith, “Original Sin as ‘Envy,’ ” 227–230. Smith points out that some of the church fathers and also more recent scholars have opined that the essence of original sin is envy and that all the Ten Commandments in one way or another prohibit envy. (E.g., idolatry is attractive to people who think they can use its techniques to get what they don’t yet have from God/the gods.) Smith suggests that the Decalogue should be taken chiastically so that idolatry (“theological envy”) and covetousness (“anthropological envy”) are actually the foundational stipulations of the covenant. In other words, the tenth word/commandment is not a small, quiet conclusion but a capstone for the entire Ten. In Smith’s structuring of the Decalogue, the first word/commandment is comprehensive, but the remaining nine are ordered so as to concentrate chiastically on the prohibition against killing, because the violation of the others “finally attacks life itself.” Even though much of his thesis is not convincing ultimately, the honor he gives to the final commandment in contrast to the way it is sometimes slighted deserves attention.

<sup>78</sup> This is the second and final time “neighbor” (**רֵעֵךְ**) occurs in the Ten Words/Commandments (cf. 20:16). Again it has the meaning not of someone who lives nearby but the legal meaning of “anyone else/some other person.”

starting point of stealing (forbidden by the eighth commandment) and, in the case of coveting someone else's spouse,<sup>79</sup> adultery (the seventh commandment).<sup>80 1</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> Again we remind the reader that the paradigmatic nature of OT law requires extrapolating from the masculine singular, the form most laws are given in, to all persons, genders, and numbers. No thoughtful ancient Israelite would ever have said, e.g., "But what about a woman's coveting her neighbor's husband?" He or she would have known that legal language almost always used the second-person singular as an efficient way of stating a law rather than as a way of excluding anyone from having to obey it.

<sup>80</sup> In this connection B. Lang has argued that a special purpose of this commandment was "protecting the rights of Israelites who were absent for a protracted period to be secure in their marriages and possessions" (" 'Du sollst nicht nach der Frau eines anderen verlangen': Eine neue Deutung des 9. und 10. Gebots," *ZAW* 93 [1981]: 216–24). He suggests that Exod 34:24 represents a promise of the same sort of security. This seems to us a limitation of this word/commandment to a sort of situation to which it surely applies but which is only one of many to which it applies.

<sup>1</sup> Stuart, D. K. (2006). *Vol. 2: Exodus*. The New American Commentary (466–468). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.