Sunday, July 29, 1979
THE TENTH COMMANDMENT
Exodus 20:17; Matthew 4:1-10

For a number of weeks now we've been considering the Ten Commandments in this sermon series, what these commandments meant to the people of the Old Testament, and what they mean for us as Christians. In their original form, the Ten Commandments were very brief, probably something like this: (1) I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other Gods before me. (2) You shall not make for yourself any graven images of God. (3) You shall not take the name of the Lord. your God in vain. (4) Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. (5) Honor your father and your mother. (6) You shall not kill. (7) You shall not commit adultery. (8) You shall not steal. (9) You shall not bear false witness. (10) You shall not covet.

Ten brief commandments, simple yet far reaching and profound, touching every aspect of our relationship to God and to each other. Today we come to the end of our journey in looking at these commandments. We have come full circle, for the tenth commandment, "You shall not covet," is a practical application of the first commandment, "You shall have no other Gods before me."

The tenth commandment relates to our deepest motivation; it relates to what we put first in our lives, and thus it is probably no accident that it was placed last. In any list, the first and the last are often the ones easiest remembered. I have been told that in job interviews, if you are one of those being interviewed, it is best to be the first one or the last one interviewed. You will more easily remembered, and probably have a better chance for getting the job. For the same reason the first page and the fast page of a magazine are the most expensive advertising space.

The tenth commandment is also one of the most difficult to keep. The other commandments deal mostly with actions--what to do and what not to do, but this commandment deals with our inner attitudes, with what leads us one direction or another.

What then does this tenth commandment mean? "You shall not covet." To begin with, there is a difference between coveting and normal desire. This commandment is not against human desire. Desire in itself is not wrong or evil, although unrestrained desire can lead us to do wrong.

Furthermore, the desire for certain objects or things can lead us down a wrong road while the desire for other goals can lead us down a right road. In other words, the object of our ultimate desire will determine whether it leads to life or to death. For example, if my main desire in life is to make as much money as possible — that object and that desire may destroy me. On the other hand, if my main desire is to find a vocation which will use my talents and give meaning to my life, then that desire may lead me to find fulfillment in my living.

The point is desire can be a good part of life when rightly employed and directed. Human desire can lead to progress, can help us grow and reach for our potential. That kind of desire is good for all of us.

To put it another way, there is nothing at all wrong with honest ambition, the desire for excellence, hard work, wanting to get ahead. Such positive desires can stretch the potential of every human being to do the best that he or she can with his or her talents.

In addition, most societies have within them various symbols of success or getting ahead, and that's all right as long as we do not give too much value to such symbols. Some people want to drive bigger cars, although that may be changing; others want to live in exclusive neighborhoods or belong to private clubs or send their children to private schools. And again, that's all right if people can afford it. In our kind of society, we can make such choices. Our Christian faith does not say such things are bad in themselves.

The danger is we come to believe that we are better than others because we can afford such things, or another danger is that we can begin to covet such things too much so that our life is thrown out of balance.

There is the further danger that some who can afford such things then begin to use other artificial barriers such as race, sex, religion, or ethnic origin, to exclude certain segments of the population from ever having the opportunity to enjoy such things. Then some people for artificial reasons are now allowed to enjoy the symbols of their own success. It may thwart an honest desire to get ahead.

What we all need to remember in this regard is that God never judges us on the basis of what we have. What God wants to know is what we do with what we have. That's the test. Whatever has been given to me is not credit to me. What I do with what has been given to me, that's what tells the different.

The more open our society is so that people's legitimate desires can be worked out, the healthier that society is going to be. When people are kept from realizing their legitimate desires for artificial reasons like race, sex, religion, or ethnic origin, then that society is in trouble and will one day explode.

Thus far we've been talking about normal human desires. Now let's look more carefully at the difference between coveting and desire. As we've been saying, desire in itself can be good. We applaud those people who love life, who desire to get the most out of life, who search for beauty, who experience the heights and depths of living. We applaud those persons who can enjoy the things of the wor1d, who are not afraid to risk their ta1ents, who wan. to keep growing in knowledge and experience, who want to know more, who believe that one never stops learning. We admire people who have a thirst for knowledge, who search for the truth and who never believe they have arrived at the whole truth.

All of this and more is at the level of legitimate desire, the seeking, the searching, the yearning that is a part of all of us.

Coveting, on the other hand is misplaced or corrupted desire. Coveting is the act of placing a thing or the fulfillment of a need into the ultimate. Covetousness in this sense is a form of idolatry. To want something or someone so much that our whole life is thrown out of balance, that is coveting.

All of us have known people who wanted something so much that they reorganized their whole life in an attempt to obtain it. If they failed, then their whole life came apart. I once knew a person who for years had his eye on a particular position in a company for which he worked. Wanting that job became the center of his existence. He was sure that if he got that position, it would solve all or most of his problems in life. .1hen the time came, he did not get the job and that almost destroyed his life.

Here we can see the difference between legitimate desire and coveting. To desire a certain position or job, to want to get ahead as this man had done is all right. But to make that desire the center of one's existence is to corrupt it and make it into a false god. Coveting is believing that something other than God can finally give us life and make us full. It is idolatry.

When my ultimate desire fastens on anything less than God, it becomes destructive, for that is where desire turns into covetousness and covetousness will begin to rob my life of its potential because it will narrow my vision, depress my limits, violate my purpose in life. To covet is to attempt to fill the empty spaces of my life with things. To covet is to believe that something less than God will make me feel adequate or secure. To covet is to respond to the things of the world as if they somehow are ultimate or eternal or saving.

The proof of the destructiveness of coveting is that it is a disease that is not cured when the objects of our coveting are finally achieved.

A friend of mine had a legitimate desire which turned into covetousness. He believed that if he once attained a net worth of one million dollars or more, then his life would be complete. He achieved that goal after much hard work and sacrifice. Yet when he arrived at this goal, he found it empty. And so, he had to find another goal and then another.

Again, do not misunderstand. There's nothing wrong with the desire to get ahead, nothing wrong with setting and reaching goals in our lives — what is wrong is when we make a certain goal our god and come to believe that achieving that goal will solve all our problems and take away the emptiness that fills our lives. Actually, what most people discover is that the emptiness is taken away temporarily, and it is taken away not when they reach the goal, but while they are on the journey pursuing the goal. When the goal is reached, the emptiness returns.

In coveting we make the mistake of giving eternal value to something less than God. Thus, what the 10th commandment is trying to teach us is that lusting after and obtaining things in life will never ultimately satisfy us. All of this world's goods cannot fill the empty spaces of one human being. All of this world status, honor, and prestige cannot overcome the insecurity of one human life. We all have deep within us the thirst for God and nothing else except God can satisfy that thirst. When we seek to quench that thirst with anything less than God, we initiate a process of self-destruction.

Like all of us, Jesus Christ was tempted to fill the vacuum wi.th something less than God. The story of the temptation of Jesus read earlier from the New Testament is about that. Jesus Christ responded to the temptations with the knowledge that obtaining worldly fame and power would not satisfy the thirst for eternity.

Thus, the best cure for covetousness is prevention. If there is a vacuum in life where God out to be, why not fill that vacuum with what will satisfy it — with the living God.

Jesus Christ put it this way — "Seek first the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all other things shall be yours as well." When a person puts first things first, all other things begin to fall into their proper place. Put the wrong things first, and everything else in life is out of place.

But how does one put God first and prevent covetousness? It begins with such simple things as the regular worship of God. Although we can in no way plan, organize or manipulate God, yet without a careful discipline we cannot receive God either.

Becoming a part of a Christian community, a congregation like this one can be a tremendous help in putting God first in our lives. We need to be in the company of other believers so that our faith can be supported and strengthened.

So, we see the connection between the first commandment and the last commandment. “I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other Gods before me.” “You shall not covet.” The first commandment is the answer to the last, and the answer to all those in between. When our life expresses. the image of God and is in touch with the infinite, lifegiving, self-fulfilling love of God, when God is the source and goal of our deepest desire, then we begin to live out creation’s purpose and then we find our deepest joy. Amen.