

## **THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND THE MORAL LIFE**

### **Session IX**

#### **The Tenth Commandment**

**“You shall not covet” (Exodus 20:17 = Deuteronomy 5:21)**

### **I. The Old Testament Meaning**

1. The last of the “Ten Words” makes it clear that we are not dealing with a mere list of dos and don'ts but, rather there is a concern for the emotional roots of actions.

2. It may be that the Old Testament regards coveting as the root of sin itself since it was at the root of the first sin (Genesis 3:6). The “Ten Words” begins a process which Jesus continues in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17-48), the process of recognizing that immoral actions are symptoms of a spiritual condition which leads to the actions. Adam and Eve in the Garden did not merely break a commandment but broke a commandment because they had turned away from God.

### **II. St. Thomas Aquinas (*Catechetical Instructions*)**

1. For Aquinas the key text is I John 2:16: “For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world” This commandment indicates that God does not simply judge actions but sees into the heart.: “For with God the intention is taken for the deed, and thus the words, ‘Thou shalt not covet,’ mean to include not only the taking by act, but also the intention to take.”

2. The reason for this restraint on desire is that human desire, under sin, is without limit. God is the true object of human desire but apart from God our desires are without object and, thus, can not be satisfied.

3. Covetousness also destroys the love of neighbor and, thus, undermines the keeping of all the commandments. The coveting of things can not be reconciled with the love of neighbor: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” (I Timothy 6:10).

### **III. John Calvin**

1. For Calvin this commandment has a simple purpose: “Since God wills that our whole soul be possessed with a disposition to love, we must banish from our hearts all desire contrary to love...no thought should steal upon us to move our hearts to a harmful covetousness that tends to our neighbor's loss” (*Institutes*, II.viii.49).

2. Love, as Calvin understands it, is not simply a feeling or emotion but has its root in the soul; the soul filled with covetousness is quite simply incapable of love in the real sense: “Now how

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does it happen that desires hurtful to your brother enter your heart, unless it is that you disregard him and strive for yourself alone? For if your whole heart were steeped in love, not one particle of it would lie open to such imaginings. The heart, then, in so far as it harbors covetousness, must be empty of love" (*Institutes*, II.viii.50).

3. Love (of God and neighbor) excludes covetousness. What God demands of us (and provides to us through grace) is a high thing: "He requires a marvelously tempered heart, and does not permit the tiniest pinprick to urge against the law of love" (*Institutes*, II.viii.50).

4. For Calvin, we must clear about the purpose of the commandments: "Here is the object of the teaching of the law: to join man by holiness of life to his God...to make him cleave to God (Deuteronomy 11:22, 30:20)" (*Institutes*, II.viii.50).

#### **IV. Martin Luther (*The Large Catechism*)**

1. Luther understands this command to be aimed not at a discrete action but at our whole corrupted nature: "Such is nature that we all begrudge another's having so much as we have. Everyone acquires all he can and lets others look out for themselves. Yet we all pretend to be upright. We know how to put up a fine front to conceal our rascality."

2. This commandment, Luther says, is not simply addressed to those who are obviously wicked but, also to "the people who wish to be commended as honest and virtuous because they have not offended against the preceding commandments."

3. Covetousness is a strong but subtle desire and if "you give the world an inch, it will take a yard, and at length open injustice and violence follow." This commandment reflects God's ultimate purpose for us which is "to destroy all the roots and causes of our injuries to our neighbors."

4. Like Calvin, Luther reminds us that the ultimate purpose of the Law is to "make our whole life pleasing to God" so that the commandments "are the true fountain from which all good works must spring, the true channel through which all good works must flow."