

**Sermon Series: “A Post-Lenten Look at the Decalogue”**

***The Most Poisonous of Sins***

**Pastor Norwood N. “Woody” Hingle III, Ph.D.**

**Sunday, May 31, 2020**

In the ancient world, when one wanted to get rid of an enemy, a common way of doing it was through poison. E.g., the Roman Emperor Nero did not like Britannicus, whom he saw as a rival to his rule, and he had him poisoned to death (Tacitus, *Annals of Imperial Rome* xiii.14ff). E.g., later he wanted to kill with poison his childhood tutor Seneca, but Seneca got wind of it and instead eating rich food he ate mostly simple things like fruit and fresh water (ibid., xv. 43ff; xv.62ff.)! Today, poison is still used to do away with one’s enemies. E.g. I have read where not too long ago in 2006 Russian dissident, Alexander Litvinenko, was in Great Britain and died from being poisoned. This type of doing away with one’s enemies is secretive, not out in the open, but it is lethal. It very much reminds me of the way Satan tries to do away with his enemies— anyone who bears the name of a Christ follower— he wants to poison. His method of poisoning us is revealed in the last of the 10 Commandments.

READ Exodus 20:17 (p. 66)

**CONTEXT:** Moses has just given us nine commandments: no other God before God, no idols, don't use the Lord's name in vain, honor the Sabbath, honor father and mother, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, and don't bear false witness. Now we come to the tenth commandment.

READ v 17. "The 10th commandment, as OT scholar John Durham states, ' . . . prohibits an excessive desire for any property belonging to any other person bound to the covenant with Yahweh' (*Exodus*, p. 299). In other words, this commandment is bound up in the heart of a person who cannot stop thinking such thoughts as, 'I wish I had Jessie's girl!'" That song by Rick Springfield, which was number 1 in the U.S. in 1981, helps us to see clearly what it means to covet what someone has. He wants Jessie's girlfriend and he thinks about her a lot, kind of like an obsession. That is what this 10th commandment is addressing. It could be someone's wife, it could be someone's husband, it could be something a person owns, it could be a person's popularity, that he or she is in the "in" group. E.g., I recall when I was in college I went on a summer mission in Colorado with about 30 college students from around the country, and in the first week or so when we were all getting to know each other there was one guy whom all the girls seemed to like and he really knew how to talk to them; I recall one day we were all doing the dishes together after a meal and he was talking to the girls about how detergent works to clean dishes, and the girls were mesmerized by him, and I was envious—how does he come up with such great things to talk about?! I did not rejoice in his charisma with the ladies, I was frustrated, I did not feel kindly toward him, and I wanted what he had.

"What makes it the most poisonous of sins? As Durham observes, "The tenth commandment, then, with its emphasis on the attitude of mind and heart that opens the way to compromise, is a summary commandment, a prohibition of an attitude that precedes the violation of any or all the other commandments" (p. 300). Cf. Romans 7:7-8." OT scholar Peter Enns (*Exodus*, p. 424 n.28) disputes

this point—he is not convinced the tenth commandment is an attitude which leads to the other nine commandments, but I agree with Durham. Think about it: if I covet what others have, like a car or a house or a spouse, then that could become my “god” or my idol, so the first two commandments would be broken. Such coveting for a car or a house or someone’s spouse could lead me to cursing God because I did not have it, and it could lead me to breaking the Sabbath and because I will work seven days a week to get these things. And such coveting could lead me to dishonoring my parents and not helping them financially because I am so wrapped up in getting the car or the house, and I could be willing to commit adultery to get another’s spouse, or even murder, or stealing or lying to get these things. In many ways coveting and envy is the gateway to all the other sins, and in this way it is the most poisonous of sins. And we all are vulnerable to it, even those in church leadership. I recall in the book *Gospel Coach* by S. Thomas and T. Wood (p. 64ff) it is mentioned that church pastors often get motivated by power, approval, comfort, and security. I think a lot of that motivation comes from envy of seeing other successful pastors and wanting to be like them. E.g., I recall at times ministers have been asked to speak at a certain function or be on a certain committee and I find myself getting grumpy inside and thinking, “Why wasn’t I asked to do that? I certainly have the qualifications!” The Holy Spirit had to show me the depravity it is—the focus is on me, and my “honor” became my own idol. E.g., I recall once I was asked to be part of a group of pastors to meet together, and a pastor friend of mine asked me, “Why do you think I wasn’t chosen?”

“Why do people covet? Two common reasons are that they focus their lives on one thing— more, which ironically will never fulfill or satisfy, and they have allowed their hearts to lack enthusiastic thankfulness for what they have.”

Advertisers know how to get us to want more—one way that often works is to have an influential person with a brand name logo on their shirt. E.g., I recall

years ago a professional tennis player—I believe it was Jimmy Connors—had McDonald’s golden arches patch on his shirt as he played. E.g., our Superdome has been called lately not “The Louisiana Superdome” but rather “The Mercedes Benz Superdome”, though I know Mercedes Benz has decided not to use their name on the Superdome. But the result is that we desire McDonald’s because an influential person endorses them, or a Mercedes Benz because a favorite place in New Orleans bears its name. And what feeds our lust for more is the fact not just that we aren’t thankful for what we have, but we aren’t enthusiastically thankful. In other words, it has not hit us how genuinely blessed we are. But when we see how some people in the world live, we should be enthusiastically thankful. E.g., do you have a spouse? Well, some people have never had a spouse. We need to be very thankful for our spouses! E.g., do you have a home? I was driving this week in New Orleans and came to a stop light and a man was standing there with a sign which said, “Don’t have a home”.

“How can we stop our coveting? By daily asking for God’s ‘anti - venom’ to fill us— His Holy Spirit! Cf. Galatians 5:22-26.” READ Galatians 5:22-26. We are celebrating Pentecost Sunday, which is the birthday of the Church where the Holy Spirit came upon the first church. And the fruit of the Holy Spirit is that it give us the power to be healed from coveting and envying others. What does this look like? E.g., I recall when I was growing up I knew two sisters who were godly women, and one married a wealthy husband and the other married a man not quite so wealthy, but from there was no jealousy when they got together— they just loved to get together and be a blessing to each other. We are to be a group of believers who readily and selflessly show honor to one another, who rejoice in one another’s good fortune, their promotion at work, their child’s career success— and we can do this because our eyes are on Jesus and we are so very thankful to know Him that we are truly satisfied in life with where He has us.