

The 10th Commandment: Desire

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Date: 05 September 2021

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[0 : 00] what is it that you want? What is it that you think will make you happier? What is it that you think will make life more enjoyable? What is it that others seem to have that you feel keeps evading you? Where, when you're alone, does your imagination take you? What scenarios play out in those small, still moments of your mind? What paradises and towers do you build within the confines of your own imaginative playground? What is it that you desire?

I begin with these questions because the last commandment, unlike the others, legislates exclusively in the mind, heart, and soul. Over the past few weeks, all the commandments we've looked at so far have had their primary focus, at least as they're written in the law, on the external action.

We have, of course, looked deeper at each one to discern the heart behind them, just as Jesus taught. But the wording of the commandments themselves has been focused on the visible action, making idols, murder, stealing, adultery, for example. But coveting or harboring desires for that which belongs to someone else, well, that occurs exclusively in the mind. When the film Inception first came out, its tagline was, your mind is the scene of the crime. And that's kind of what this last commandment teaches.

Our minds, the seat of our wants and desires, the hub where our dreams and imaginations take us to all sorts of places, both beautiful and dark, that is where we break this law. And this commandment teaches us that our very desires have become disordered, and that to follow God faithfully, well, they need to be reordered. And those are our two points, very simply, disordered desires and reordered desires.

So we'll start with the first, disordered desires. The author, G.K. Chesterton, I think he was absolutely on target when responding to the question of what is wrong with the world, said simply, I am. Even with the First World War around the corner when he said that, he had the wisdom to see that the world's problems were not primarily to do with the external, but actually to do with the internal. Our minds are swarming with all sorts of different desires. Some are good, a desire to sleep at the end of the day, for example, that is a good and healthy desire. Or a desire to go for a run in order to stay fit and healthy, again, that's a good desire, one which I confess I wish I had more of. And we could mention hundreds of good and necessary things which we desire. Desire in and of itself is not a bad thing. After all, before sin entered the world and broke it, God planted a garden in Eden. And Genesis tells us, the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground, trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. Now, the word that there is translated pleasing to the eye, well, that's the same word that in Exodus chapter 20 is translated to covet.

[3 : 29] The word is to do with desire. God gave Adam and Eve trees that inspired good desire. But the problem is that not all desires are good. When God created the world and brought forth those trees, well, at that point, all desires were good. But an incident at one particular tree changed that. And once again, the fountainhead of this commandment is in the very first sin. Genesis says, when the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food, and that phrase again, pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and she ate it. She also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate it. So again, we've got that phrase, pleasing to the eye appearing. So before, it was used only positively. But after a few choice and cunning words from the serpent, Eve began to desire the one tree that was forbidden. So you've got to give Adam and Eve everything that they could ever want. The one stipulation was that they were not to eat from one particular tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We all know once something has been placed out of limits, well, that tends to feed and stir up wrong desires. And the serpent played upon this with his wise-sounding philosophizing and his words of silk, weaving a web of temptation. And suddenly, God's single command became much harder to keep.

So that good desire for all the other trees was consumed by a single-minded and dark desire for one tree. One tree that had been forbidden and wasn't theirs to eat from.

Isn't that what we see in this commandment? You shall not covet or you shall not desire your neighbor's house. You shall not covet or desire your neighbor's wife or his male or female servant, his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

So the root of this commandment very much comes from the fall of mankind. The deceptive desire for what we can't have. The dark desire for that which belongs to someone else.

The overwhelming and powerful need to taste that which is forbidden. From that moment on in Eden, although it is possible to have good desires, now on, almost all of our desires, even our good ones, well, they're now tempered and shaped by selfishness. A good desire for sleep, to come back to our early example, well, that can sometimes be at the expense of other responsibilities that need to be seen to first and, when indulged too much, actually become laziness. A good desire to go for a run can turn into an obsession with fitness and the body that can be, not necessarily, but can be detrimental to those around us and to other parts of our lives. I think Chesterton had insight into the global and historical problem of our desires and the mind that harbors them in a way that many psychologists today just don't. For sure, they recognize that many of us do have disorder desires, but don't appreciate quite the scale of the problem. Listen to this from the Christian writer David Powlison. I think this is really helpful.

[7 : 00] Here he characterizes our mind as a cosmic battleground. He says this, this cosmic battleground is something none of the secular psychologists have seen or can see because they can't see that deeply into why we do what we do. Their own motives give them reasons not to want to see that deeply and honestly because it would mean admitting sin.

Not all of us need to see a psychologist, but that is not to say that our minds are free. Sin enslaves us to our desires. Sometimes that boils up to a point where we recognize that we do need help, where our own thoughts disturb us when we fall into patterns of addiction or when we behave in ways that are hurtful to those around us. But that's probably not the majority. Most of us kind of trundle along feeling that, yeah, we could be better and we would like to be a better version of ourselves.

And through a bit of intense effort, well, we probably could be. I think that kind of attitude, in contrast to Chesterton, was very easy to feel that, yeah, there is indeed something terribly wrong with the world, but I am not it. Listen to what the Apostle Paul says about this commandment. He's running here to the early Christians in Rome. What he says, I think, unpicks why this commandment is so important for understanding that there is actually something wrong with each and every one of us. So Paul writes, So what's the point Paul's making? Well, he, as a Jewish religious teacher, he had worked very hard to keep all the commandments. As we've mentioned, the text of most of those commandments focuses on the external first and foremost. But with the 10th commandment, even the most moral religious teacher would be brought to their knees in despair because it is all internal. The law tells Paul he is not to covet, and he knows that he has not kept and cannot keep that law in the same way that he keeps the others. He's not murdered. He's not slept with another man's wife, but he knows that his mind swarms with all sorts of disordered desires in just the same way that all of ours do. Sin dwelt in Paul and produced in him every kind of coveting and disordered desire. And in this way, well, he knew he had a sin problem. And it's in this way that we all know that we have a sin problem. Because we are what is wrong with the world. And when I say that, I don't mean that we've destroyed the world and created a climate catastrophe, although I think that potentially is true. But what I mean is that from the beginning, humanity, us, we have been slaves to the disordered desires of our heart. And the effect is a world that is tarnished by selfishness, envy, jealousy, and cruelty.

[10 : 40] Humanity has shaped and fashioned a world out of its disordered desires. And it really leaves a mark. Consider Scotland today. That idea of pursuing our disordered desires has left a people who feel unfulfilled, a generation struggling with anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, thousands of people struggling with various addictions, broken families and broken relationships, trust issues, poverty, loneliness, loneliness, staggering wealth inequality, division, racism, a lack of direction in life, and rising unhappiness. And really, that's just to name a few. And the problem is sin. The problem is our disordered desires. Unless we're unclear, we all have this problem and we are all part of this problem. Now, returning to the commandment itself, though we may not desire our neighbor's ox or donkey, although who am I to say what your deepest desires are, we may want

a nicer car like our co-worker's car, or a bigger house like our sister's house, a girlfriend or boyfriend like our flatmate does instead of our singleness, children and the chance to be a parent like our best friend, a well-paid job like our brother's job, or an easier lifestyle like the bloke just down the road who always seems to land on his feet to never seems particularly busy. And indeed, the entire advertising industry is based upon the premise that you have a lot of disordered desires and we're going to target them with the precision of a sniper. This website uses cookies so that we can track what you look at, learn all we can about who you are, and share your data with our pals so we can manipulate you to buy more stuff that promises to fill a hole and make you happy, but in reality will really just put a hole in your wallet and probably leave you even more dissatisfied than before.

And in fact, the entire online infrastructure is designed to allow you to express yourself and feed those disordered desires. Whether it's the comparatively more benign world of online shopping, or the world of online forums that cater to every niche interest that exists under the sun, or to the dark and depressing world of online pornography. There is something for everyone and we cater for your desire so that you can indulge your deepest cravings and truly be yourself.

And that, I think, is perhaps one of the most powerful lies that the devil uses in our culture today. It's a replaying of Eden minute after minute as every person mentally indulges the desires of their hearts.

And indulging desires, whether desires that are not necessarily bad or ones that objectively are, it only leads to more emptiness.

And human history would suggest it can often just leave a trail of destruction in its wake.

Psychological, relational, physical, emotional.

[14:06] And now you could very well argue that to covet or to indulge whatever your particular desires are, it doesn't really hurt anyone except the one whose mind is thinking about those things.

After all, a key contemporary dogma of our society is be yourself and you do you so long as you don't hurt anyone while you do it. But the practical problem with that is this.

Thoughts, if unchecked, tend to turn into actions, usually so slowly that they become almost imperceptible. Consider King Ahab, who was a particularly evil king of Israel.

There was a vineyard near his palace which belonged to a bloke called Naboth. Now Ahab really wanted that bit of land. So he offered to buy it off Naboth for a fairly considerable sum.

But Naboth wasn't interested. After all, God's law forbid any Israelite to sell their land in perpetuity. So Naboth said, no, thank you. So King Ahab, he went back to his palace in a bit of a sulk.

[15:12] He really wanted that vineyard. His wife, the Queen Jezebel, came over, asked him, are you a king or aren't you? If you want that vineyard, well, you make it happen.

So that's what King Ahab did. The king and queen set Naboth up by using a load of false witnesses who were prepped to say that Naboth had blasphemed and should be killed.

And so the testimony of those lying witnesses meant that Naboth was executed and Ahab got his vineyard. It's just a little example, maybe an extreme example, but it illustrates the fact that desire breeds all sorts of sins.

In this case, it was murder and false witness. But all the commandments can be broken when disordered desire is left unchecked. Disordered desire leads to idolatry, which inhibits our love of God.

It leads us to worship our desires and make idols out of our desires. It leads us to belittle God and his name and refuse to find our rest in him because we want to find our rest in those disordered desires.

[16:23] And disordered desire inhibits our love of neighbor, which leads us to ignore those we should honor, especially our parents when they get in the way of our desires, but other figures of authority as well.

It leads us to hate and despise people, to lust after people. It leads us to want what others have and leads us to tell lies to protect our desires and our interests.

Disordered desire is a quick way to break each and every commandment that has preceded this one. And that is the danger of sin.

The biggest danger, perhaps, is that our disordered desires blind us to our need for Christ. And this brings us on to our second point, reordered desires.

So if we recognize that our desires are disordered because of sin, and that no matter how hard we try, we can't reorder them through force or willpower, well, we might be liable to give up the ghost

and ask, well, what's the point?

[17:31] But here's the thing. Our disordered desires and the presence of sin blind us to the fact that we need Jesus. We need Jesus because he is the one, the only one, who can really sort out the sin problem in our lives and reorder our desires.

As we've worked through each of the Ten Commandments, we've seen time and time again that we break God's law. And we've seen time and time again that Jesus is the solution.

He saves us from our guilt by living the perfect life that we couldn't live. And he took the punishment that we deserve for every time we've broken God's law.

And this is true for the Tenth Commandment, just as it has been for all the others. But because the Tenth Commandment is so concerned with a person's internal life, there's a sense in which it gets to the heart of the problem that we've been gesturing towards all the way through this series.

We need Jesus because we cannot keep God's law on our own. Our minds betray us. And we know none of us can go a day without committing a sin in our imaginations.

[18:44] But what Jesus does is reorder our disordered desires, and he addresses the fundamental problem, which is the sin problem.

Now, Paul explains this very clearly in a lot of his letters. So, let's look at what he wrote to the church in Ephesus. And this was part of the reading that Tom read for us earlier. And here he explains where the Ephesian Christians were before Christ.

So, he says, As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sin, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of the world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air.

That's the devil. The spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time. And here's the key point.

Gratifying the cravings of the flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

[19:47] So, what Paul's saying is before Jesus, our natural disposition is to gratify the cravings and desires of the flesh. Now, the flesh, that's the phrase that the Bible often uses to personify our sinful nature.

And it is in contrast to the spirit, the spirit of God, who enables Christians to live in a new way. Which Paul helps us understand again.

Let's listen to him from his letter to the Galatian Christians. So, I say, live by the spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

For the flesh desires what is contrary to the spirit, and the spirit what is contrary to the flesh. So, when someone believes in Jesus, he gives them his spirit.

And the spirit of Christ has the power that we, by nature, don't to reorder our disordered desires.

And it works like this. The spirit changes our hearts so that we no longer desire what we once did.

[20:52] Now, the flesh is still there. Sin is, if you like, genetically tied to our bodies. But it is no longer the ruling power in the life of the believer.

The Christian's union with Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit makes change possible. It is kind of like being unplugged from the matrix.

Once unplugged, the machines are no longer in control, and you're free. Once Christ enters your life, you're unplugged from the world and its desires. Christ has set you free.

You, my brothers and sisters, says Paul to the Galatians, were called to be free. And in our freedom, to have our desires reordered.

So what does reordered desire look like? Well, Paul gives us a helpful summary in Ephesians. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires, to be made new in the attitude of your minds, and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

[22:13] People often talk about a blank slate, don't they? Most people don't want to begin completely from scratch, but it would be nice to erase all those mistakes that we've made in the past and have a fresh start of sorts, wouldn't it?

We feel this in so many areas, and often I think we probably feel this about life itself. And in Christ, we get given a blank slate. Our record of sins is wiped clean, just like marker pen off a whiteboard. We begin a new life in Christ. And Paul calls this the new self. And when we put on the new self, through God's Holy Spirit, well, we're able to live in a way that is completely reoriented.

The way that we ought to live. Not enslaved to our old habits of desire, but enabled to live a life that models the heart of the Ten Commandments.

Loving God and Christ his Son, and loving those around us just as much as we would love ourselves. And Paul summarizes this really helpfully, I think, in his letter to Titus, one of his co-workers who was spreading the gospel on the island of Crete.

[23 : 26] And this is really one of the pithiest, most helpful summaries of the gospel I think you'll find in the Bible. This is what Paul says to Titus. For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.

And it teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness, and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

And the reason that Christ's people are, at their best, a people eager to do what is good, is because their focus is no longer their own disordered desires, but Jesus Christ himself.

When Christ is our focus, our desires become oriented in the right direction. When we live for Christ and make every decision from the basis of our love for him, well, then we will be living for God in the right way and loving those around us in the right way.

Living for Jesus expels all selfishness. It's what Thomas Chalmers, the 19th century Scottish minister, called the expulsive power of a new affection.

[25 : 03] I love that phrase. I think it's so helpful. Because our new affection for Jesus expels all of our old disordered desires and affections.

The writer Neil Gaiman in his graphic novel, *The Sandman*, he's got a character who's basically the anthropomorphized personification of desire itself. And Gaiman writes this fascinating thing about desire.

He says, Love belongs to desire, and desire is always cruel. And I think Gaiman's on to something. Desire is always cruel. Or at least our disordered desires are always cruel.

They tempt us to desire the things that we can't have. They lead us to crave that which is not good for us. They lead us to make idols of our deepest longings.

And they take us away from the one person who can make us feel whole. Jesus. But I also think Gaiman is wrong when he says that love belongs to desire.

[26 : 04] Because actually, love belongs to Christ. In love, Christ died that those who believe in him might be made whole again.

He rose again and sent his spirit that those who know him might have their disordered desires reordered. And when we live in Christ, we are surrounded by his love like a song.

Like great eagle's wings wrapped around us and sheltering us from the storm. And his love is then to be displayed in the transformed life of his people.

Showing his love to all around them in absolute selflessness. So as we close and finish off this series on the Ten Commandments, I hope that what we've seen is that the law lays the foundation for Christ.

Without him, we are slaves to sin and the disordered desires of our hearts. Here's the wonderful thing. Jesus is able to bring about real, lasting change.

[27 : 15] You can change. We can change. Not on our own. But through Jesus and in Jesus. In Christ, there is hope for every messed up sinner.

No matter how messed up we are. And all of us are messed up sinners. We've heard a lot from Paul already. But I'm going to give him the last word. Because I think these words in Colossians really sum up all that we've been talking about so well.

Paul's the Colossians. Since then, you have been raised with Christ. Set your hearts on things above. Where Christ is.

Seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above. Not on earthly things. For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

And when Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.