

WHEN LESS IS MORE

By Paul Penno

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All of us are familiar with the scenario. Our neighbor, Don Jones, drives up one day in his new BMW. We can't help but notice. That old Ford Taurus he had been driving was a respectable, but modest car. It made us feel comfortable. But this new BMW is another story. This classy car makes us feel uncomfortable. In fact, a new emotion seems to surface. It is envy. It is the emotion known as "keeping up with the Joneses." We resolve the problem a few days later by driving up in our driveway in a new Lexus. Now we feel better.

If this scenario seems familiar, it is because it is being played out everywhere across our nation. Our culture is geared to create these emotions in all of us. Notice the ads on the television. In general they are saying, "Look at these people. They are having a great time. Look at what they have. If you had what they had, you would be happy too. Don't you wish you had what they had? Go out and buy it today! Don't have the cash? Charge it!"

Those who design the advertising that we see, hear and read seek to encourage discontentment as a strategy to sell their products. Their job is to create a desire in you for their product. If they can get you dissatisfied with what you have, they stand a better chance of selling you what they have. Whether you really need it or not is immaterial. Unfortunately, they have been all too successful. Advertising executives spend a billion dollars a year in marketing research. A vast network of people, from Madison Avenue to Hollywood, spend their full work week designing novel ways to trigger our desires. Music, slogans, Technicolor sights, digitally produced sounds, and dramatic movement, all collaborate to create a passion to possess. Nothing is beyond consideration. They use envy, pride, fear, jealousy, nostalgia, and sex to produce the desired effect. Their goal, like that of all salesmen, is to temporarily suspend our self-control.

Unfortunately they are creating a pattern of thinking—an attitude of covetousness that will continue long after their product is forgotten. They are creating dissatisfaction with life. They want you to want more. Visualize it. Desire it. See yourself in it. And you will possess it! This is where many people live.

The prosperity gospel has been in vogue for several decades. Clearly, we are living beyond our means; and this is evident to the world not only in our national debt, placing us in danger of losing the trust of our trading partners, but in our own personal consumerism. Our economy is largely service-based rather than production-based today. Meanwhile, as we pamper ourselves, jobs are traveling overseas. This is not merely a partisan political issue, for we are all caught up in this consumerism, materialism, and greed. And living beyond our means—or even desiring to do so—is a good definition of coveting.

Leading Christian celebrities have demonstrated, if not outright declared, “Greed is good!” And how do we reach those who are “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God”? By telling them how Jesus can help them “be all they can be,” of course. Born-again baseball players tell the teens how Jesus improved their RBI statistics, and beauty queens are testimonies to the worldly success that follows those who put Jesus first.

Instead of challenging the culture and calling men and women to repentance, Christianity has been marketing a false gospel, responding to false needs, reinforcing false gods. Christianity covets praise, money, and pleasure; many church leaders covet success; and the church becomes a cheap instrument of secular aims. If we are to judge by the lifestyles and attitudes of contemporary Christians, they not only covet the vices of the world, they lend them their patronage and blessing. And when God doesn’t give them what they covet, smart shoppers move on.

The ten commandments are the good news about what the Savior does. Most people look upon the ten commandments as hard rules impossible to obey, yet God gave them to His people at Mt. Sinai as ten great messages of good news.

He said, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself” (Exodus 19:4). Think of the baby eagle trying to learn to fly; imagine you are one. You flap your wings wildly in terror as you see ground zero coming up; then comes mother with her great outstretched wings under you. She flies under you and carries you home to safety. This is what the Savior does for every human being who will let Him do so!

It’s the meaning of the word “succor” in Hebrews 2:18 in the KJV: “In that He Himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succor [aid] them that are tempted.” Yes, sin has ruined you; you are

going down; but here I am, I have already paid the price to redeem you. Believe Me, and I assure you that you will never do the evil things that these ten commandments warn you against. People need to know this!

Millions are caught like a fly in the spider's web of despair, thinking that it's impossible to overcome temptations to sin. They need to know the truth about this Saviour who has already brought us out of bondage!

The tenth commandment is the strongest of all the ten, the one that zeroes in on the most sensitive level of our consciousness. It says, "You shall not covet . . ." anything or anybody that belongs to someone else.

Among all the stories in ancient monastic folklore, one stands out as a particularly insightful commentary on the tenth commandment. Once upon a time, the story teaches, a disciple traveled for miles to sit at the feet of an old mystic who had acquired an unusual reputation for holiness. People came from far and wide simply to watch her work, to listen to her chant, to hear her comment on the scriptures. Here without doubt was a person of substance, an impacting personality, an imposing figure.

What the seeker found when he finally reached the site of her hermitage, however, was only a tiny little woman sitting on the floor of a bare room plaiting straw baskets alone. Shocked, the seeker said, "Old woman, where are your books? Where are your chair and footstool? Where are your bed and mattress?"

And the old woman answered him back, "And where are yours?"

"But I'm only passing through," the seeker said.

"And so am I," said the old woman knowingly.

Jesus' promise here is that you shall not crave. To make the point clear, God specifies some things that we must not "covet." (The word means to desire, to want to have, to want to enjoy what is not ours.) The idea sums up all of the other nine commandments, but gets down to the root problem—the desire which burns deep inside the heart long before anything is said or done to express it. Covetousness is "action in the egg." The covetous person is a thief in the shell; the thief is the covetous person out of the shell.

Many "goody-goody" people imagine that they are upright non-transgressors of God's law because their acts (they think) are okay. They boast of their "righteousness." But this tenth commandment is

the one that wakes them up to the truth about themselves. They never saw it before, but there's a cancer in their hearts, deep down.

Saul of Tarsus was one such person before he became Paul the apostle. He tells us that "as touching the law, . . . touching the righteousness which is in the law, [he was] blameless" (Philippians 3:5, 6, KJV). He was not only okay, but proud of it. But one day he discovered this tenth commandment. It had been there all along, he just had not seen it. It wasn't an ax chopping down a tree or a few limbs off of it; it was digging up the very root itself. Yes, that secret longing, that lust was deep in his heart! The cancer was there! He had never seen it before.

He tells us of his discovery: "I was alive once [contented with myself] without the law; but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death" (Romans 7:9, 10). Suddenly I found myself condemned, he says. All my self-illusion was gone; I was a sinner! At last I saw myself standing naked before the judgment bar of God.

"I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet [that tenth commandment!]' (verse 7). At last Saul of Tarsus was awake and was converted.

In the Persian Gulf War, shortly before the launching of the ground attack, Saddam Hussein, the butcher of Baghdad, said that it was going to be the mother of all battles. It was not, but that's what he called it. Sometime after that President Bush introduced his wife as the mother of all Bushes. That was certainly more true than what Saddam said about the mother of all battles.

The tenth commandment can appropriately be titled "the mother of all sins." This is the sin that produces all of the other sins. This one is a matter of desire. It is invisible. It is an inward sin that is manifested in all the other nine. It is really a combination of two words: *have* and *more*. So the word covet means to desire to have more.

It is said that when Alexander the Great had conquered the known world he instructed his officers that when he died his hands were to be left outside the coffin so that all might see that though he had conquered the world he could carry nothing with him into the hereafter. We are born into this world grabbing and grasping, but when we leave this world we die with our hands open and empty.

Paul's discovery is that of "every man" and woman, too. We go through life content with ourselves, feeling spiritually that we are "rich,

have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” all the while unconscious that in the sight of Heaven we are “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (Revelation 3:17). That tenth commandment has awakened us also.

“Sin . . . dwells in me . . . In me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. . . . Sin . . . dwells in me. . . . I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:17-24).

Here is Paul praying with heart-felt tears, “Purge me . . . and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me hear joy and gladness, . . . hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation” (Psalm 51:7-12). A prayer like that never goes unanswered!

This discovery of truth is a precious experience. It’s nothing to be avoided, but to be welcomed. Eternal life begins when we see and confess the truth. Even pastors, priests, and bishops—all are in the same condition. We all need the One who “will save His people from their sins, . . . Immanuel, which is translated, ‘God with us’” (Matthew 1:21, 23).

The tenth commandment preaches the gospel to us—when it is understood as an assurance under the new covenant. It does no good for us to promise to keep God’s commandments. Our promises to God are like ropes of sand. But what is important is believing God’s promises to us: “You shall not covet.” In other words, the Savior says: I will take away the selfish lust that is in your heart; I will cleanse your mind; I will set you free from the slavery to adulterous or any kind of covetous desiring; I cannot make it impossible for you to be tempted, but I can give you grace that will “teach [you] to say to ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live [a] self-controlled, upright and godly [life] in this present age” (Titus 2:11, 12, NIV).

A young man writes us a letter. He is disturbed, worried. “It’s my problem night and day, thinking about women. I see them all the time in my mind’s eye. I can’t look the other way when I see one. The

problem goes down deep inside me, down to my toes. What can I do? I realize that Jesus says that it's in the heart; and that's where I know it is! Help me!"

Many a person is a slave to pornography who hates it. It's like the custom in the old Roman Empire—a murderer was chained to the corpse of his murder victim. Paul cries out, "Who will deliver me from this body of this death? . . . With the flesh, [I serve] the law of sin" (Romans 7:25). You carry the pollution around with you, chained to you.

But there is solid good news. Paul admits that just quoting the law to him doesn't help. "The commandment which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me" (7:10, 11). You can preach hell-fire and brimstone and terrify people, but that doesn't change the heart. Fear is not the motivation that works.

But Paul describes something that does work: "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (8:2-4).

Let's analyze what he says, because there is "most precious" truth here:

1. The tenth commandment can't save anyone (none of them can save).

2. But God sent His Son to solve the problem of deep-inside-of-us, down-to-our-toes sin. He accomplished this wonderful achievement by taking upon Himself our same fallen, sinful flesh that we have. Thus He met and endured all the temptations that we have, including those of the young man who wrote us that letter.

3. Jesus conquered, defeated, sin in our fallen, sinful flesh. It is not true that the Virgin Mary gave Him flesh that was any different than the flesh which we all have. His name is "God with us," not God-far-off-from-us. It wouldn't be fair for Jesus to deceive us, to pretend to be "in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" if He fudged on it and managed to get an "exemption" from the DNA heredity that all of us have. If Jesus were to do that, Satan would shout to high heaven that Jesus disqualified Himself from becoming our Savior from sin! Satan would claim that he had invented

something that defeats God's government, and that would mean that Satan would become the ruler of the universe (some people think he is, but they are mistaken).

4. All this mighty achievement which Christ won in our "flesh" was with the purpose that "the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us." Sin has been conquered forever; that nasty root of selfish covetousness deep in the heart has been pulled up. All those tearful prayers for "a clean heart" are already answered.

5. What kind of a new life do we live now? We "do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." It's very simple: You go for a walk with the Holy Spirit leading; You let the Holy Spirit hold you by the hand. Step by step, moment by moment, grace teaches you to say "No" to every temptation; You listen to the Holy Spirit; And you say "No!" to the temptation; Now you say, "Thank You, Lord, for saving my soul."

But right here we must remember that temptation is not sin; the sin comes only in our saying "Yes!" to it. A thousand temptations do not equal one sin. We must not expect God to do what He has said He will never do: He will not make up our mind for us, He will not take from us the freedom to choose. But when Christ gave Himself for us on His cross, He purchased something precious for every one of us: He gave us the power of choice. Yes, we choose heaven or hell.

So we tell the young man who wrote the letter: don't pray that God will turn you into a stone or a tree so you can't be tempted; He doesn't want statues in His kingdom. He wants living people there! His grace will "teach" you, just like a schoolteacher taught you how to write your ABC's; He will teach you to say "No!" to every such temptation. Don't get the cart before the horse: even before you begin to pray, the Holy Spirit is already "teaching" you to say "No!" You don't need to waste your breath praying for Him to do that. Now make your choice to listen to Him, to say "No!" to Satan. Then, the next step comes up: thank God for the victory He has promised to give you "in Christ," and keep on saying "No!" to the temptation. Satan is a conquered foe; he cannot force you to transgress.

The meaning of the word "covet" is to desire inordinately anything that God has not seen fit to give to you now, and which may not be good for you to have now. Here is a poignant story to illustrate the lust for money and power characterizing our era: One night, Stephen Joseph, a partner of an investment firm, made what seemed to be a routine business trip to Minnesota and stayed for drinks with a

client. “In the course of the evening Joseph happened to mention how much he expected to be paid. The number made an impression on the client’s seven-year-old son, who was eavesdropping of the staircase. Two days later the boy handed his father an essay he had prepared for school. It was called “What I Want to Be When I Grow Up” and almost perfectly captured the mood of the day.

“I want to be an investment banker. If you had 10,000 shares I sell them for you. I make a lot of money. I will make a lot of money. I will be a millionaire. I will have a big house. It will be fun for me.

Contrast this with the example of Louis de Greer who was an ardent Christian and energetic entrepreneur, who managed to accommodate a dignified lifestyle with pious expenditure in just these ways. Even though he stocked his home with fine nut wood furniture imported from France and Italy, his self-tithing for the poor was widely known, as was his sincere help for refugees from central European theaters of the Thirty Years’ War. When in 1646 he drew up his will for his children and heirs, he admonished them to “fear God and keep his commandments and think on the poor and oppressed; then you shall enjoy God’s blessings.” And he reminded them that when he had come to Amsterdam, in hard-pressed times, he had made a vow before God to give 200 guilders a year to the poor for every child of his own. God had heard his prayer and had prospered him, and he, in his turn, had kept his vow. He commended his children to do so in their turn.

Notice the contrast in these two families. Both prosperous, both successful. Neither thought money was evil or that prosperity was to be avoided. And yet, one saw prosperity chiefly as a means of acquiring and consuming, whereas the other saw it chiefly as a means of saving and giving.

You may think your secret coveting is impossible to overcome. Satan may wrestle with you and try his best to discourage you. But remember the battle that Jesus fought with him; remember His cross where He chose to die rather than to give in to Satan. We’re talking here about the nitty-gritty, the bottom line of salvation, the difference between heaven and hell, between eternal life and eternal damnation.

There are a thousand things for us to be tempted to “covet”—whatever is our neighbor’s that we don’t have. Houses, cars, clothes, jobs, positions—yes, the newspapers, magazines, TV are all full of the alluring advertisements intended to create covetous lust of some kind in our hearts. It’s a never-ending slavery we are enticed into,

making us always unhappy, always wanting something else, always seeking it, never satisfied.

The sum of the whole matter is to trust God, and be satisfied with the fatness of His house, even though to the man, who blindly burrows in the earth like a mole, it may seem leanness. This absolute trust in the Lord is absolute righteousness, the very opposite of heathenism.

“Incline my heart unto thy testimonies, and not to covetousness.” Ps. 119:36. Covetousness, therefore, is the desire for anything contrary to the commandments, anything except God’s life. That we may desire with our whole soul. The man who can say to the Lord, “Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none on earth that I desire beside Thee” is safe from the transgression of the tenth commandment, and so from the commission of any sin.

The commandments of the Lord are life everlasting, “and in keeping of them is great reward.” Not *for* keeping them, mind you, but *in* keeping them. The reward is the pure, perfect, simple life that they bring. Take heed, beware of covetousness even in the service of God. Beware of thinking that you would serve God, keep His Sabbath, for instance, if you were situated financially so that you could. There would be no virtue in your service even if you did keep it under such conditions. What kind of god is it that you propose to serve? Is it one who needs your service? or one whom you need to serve whom is rich reward? The answer to this marks the difference between heathenism and Christianity.

The satisfaction of serving Christ indeed, of knowing Him, and feeling His life in us, impelling us to action, is so great that with it one cares for nothing else. The deliciousness of perfect trust, of resting in the everlasting arms, and by that very resting partaking of their intense activity, is greater than the possession of all riches. He who has, and appropriates, the fullness of God’s life is so far from desiring anything else, that he would spurn the offer of anything that would rob him of any of that which is his by faith. “He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” and he who has all things, and knows that he has them, is absolutely shut off from the possibility of covetousness.

I heard of a teacher, who in Sunday School told the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. You recall how the Rich Man went to Hell while Lazarus went to heaven. She asked her students which one

they would like to be, the Rich Man or Lazarus. One young boy replied, "I'd like to be the Rich Man while I'm alive, and Lazarus when I die." All too often we are like this little boy.

In a cemetery in England stands a grave marker with this inscription: She died for want of things. Alongside that marker is another which reads: He died trying to give them to her.

"Send us gold, for we Spaniards have a disease that can only be cured by gold," is the reported message of Cortez to Montezuma, ruler of Mexico. A reporter asked Nelson Rockefeller, "How much money does it take to be happy?" to which the tycoon replied with refreshing honesty, "Just a little bit more."

True happiness lies in "godliness with contentment [which] is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content" (1 Timothy 6:6-8).

One afternoon author Patsy Clairmont found herself on an airplane, sitting next to a young man. She writes, "I had already observed something about this young man when I was being seated. He called me 'Ma-am.' At the time I thought, 'Either he thinks I'm ancient, or he's from the South where they still teach manners, or he's in the service.'" I decided the latter was the most likely, so I asked, "You in the service?"

"Yes, Ma-am, I am." "What branch?" "Marines."

"Hey, Marine, where are you coming from?"

"Operation Desert Storm, Ma-am."

"No kidding? Desert Storm! How long were you there?"

"A year and a half. I'm on my way home. My family will be at the airport."

She then commented that he must have thought about returning to his family and home many times while he was in the Middle East.

"Oh, no, Ma-am," he replied. "We were taught never to think of what might never be, but to be fully available right where we were."

Blessed contentment! Jesus Christ saves us "lest at any time [our] hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day [the end] come upon [us] unawares" (Lk. 21:34).

The tenth commandment tells you that indeed you have sinned; that indeed, you have a sinful nature. But it also gives you the good news that you have a Saviour who "saves completely those who

come unto God by Him” (Hebrews 7:25). Whoever you are, wherever you are, sing your song of praise to the Lamb of God. Say, “Thank you” even if you think you are saying it in advance; the truth is, you are not thanking Him in advance, you are thanking Him for shedding His precious blood for you at His cross, long ago! It’s taken you a long time to understand it and appreciate it, but thank God, you have begun! Eternal life has begun for you.