

You Shall Not Covet

By Rev. Jeffrey Smith

Preached at Bryn Athyn Cathedral May 3, 2026

Today our message covers the last of the Commandments. This command to not covet is kind of a two-for-one deal. It is contained within a single verse in Exodus 20, and New Church teachings essentially treat it as one single Commandment, and yet Swedenborg does note that it is in fact two separate Commandments. The ninth Commandment is “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house”, and the tenth is, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that *is* your neighbor’s.” Today, we will consider these two Commandments as a single command to not covet.

Here’s an interesting thing about the Commandments: the first eight Commandments have some sort of external behavior that one can observe with the senses, but the command to not covet is all in the heart. Covetous thoughts and desires can exist and fester in the spirit, and we will never know to what extent a person is or is not keeping this Commandment.

Do you have a favorite child, grandchild, or niecephew? Of course, you love them all equally, right? Well, Israel didn’t. He loved Joseph more than all the rest. One example of this is the colorful coat that his father gave him. The story indicates that it was Israel’s biased love that caused Joseph’s brothers to hate him. There were other circumstances that didn’t help Joseph’s relationship with his brothers either. For example, when Joseph told his already envious brothers about his dreams in which he ruled over them and his parents.

What was the result of this envious hatred that Joseph’s brothers had for him? They wanted to murder him, but they instead ended up selling him as a slave to some passing merchants.

At first, coveting may not seem so bad. I mean, it doesn’t seem to hurt anybody if we are just thinking about having more things. Well, coveting IS hurtful; even if it’s not hurting others, it is hurting the person doing the coveting. And, it must be bad enough that the Lord even gave it two of the ten commandment slots.

In our reading from *Secrets of Heaven* about thoughts, we learned that there are always thoughts coming into our minds, and the quality of those thoughts is a mix of some good and some evil. It seems like a strange concept when you first learn about it, but your spirit is actually in the company of other spirits—you don’t exist in spiritual solitary confinement. And your thoughts enter your mind from those surrounding spirits. This is why some thoughts may seem random, and why we can sometimes be shocked at our own thoughts. maybe even making us wonder if our own spirit resides in hell. But as that reading explains, our spiritual quality is not simply based on the quality of our thoughts.

There is an ancient nugget of wisdom that says, “You cannot keep birds from flying over your head but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.” The birds are your thoughts. They are going to fly about your head whether you like it or not. If you have negative covetous thoughts that you dislike and you shoo them away, then you have done your duty, and the thoughts are not yours. However, when you invite those thoughts to land on your head because you agree with them, and when you get pleasure from those thoughts, and you feel empowered by those thoughts, then you are inviting the birds to build a nest in our hair, and the thoughts enter your will, which is really who you are. These covetous thoughts harm you because they keep you from loving the Lord and your neighbor. So, when covetous thoughts start flying about your head, shoo them away before they make a nest.

The following are a couple of different ways that I find it useful to think about coveting. One is more obviously harmful, and the other is less harmful and more subtle. The one that is more harmful springs from an unhealthy love of self, putting the self over everything else because, as the most important being in this world, we deserve whatever we want. It is so harmful because our desire for possessions—whether money or objects or affection or fame—our desire for those possessions takes precedence over caring for our neighbor and obeying the Lord. And this is why the command against coveting is so essential, because it can act as a spiritual gateway to breaking the other Commandments.

For example, “no other gods”: the thing that we covet can act as a “god” because it becomes most important for us. “Remember the Sabbath”: taking time for the Lord becomes less important when our time is instead spent on that which is coveted. We can get ourselves into sad situations of stealing, committing adultery, or murdering when our covetous desires go unchecked. This is the type of coveting that Joseph’s brothers experienced. They coveted the love he got from Israel, they experienced feelings of hatred for Joseph, and then they wished to murder him.

The other type of coveting we can think about here is more subtle, and it springs from a love of the world and material things, but it can take away from our enjoyment of life. It may not breed the same malice and hatred as our above example that stems from the love of self, but if we aren’t careful, it can turn into that. This coveting can be so subtle that you might not even call it coveting, you might just call it *discontentedness*. We experience this discontent because we are not happy with what we have. We see what others have and we think we would finally be happy if we just had the job, the salary, the family, the personality, the attention, the fame, the *you-name-it* that someone else might have, but we *don’t* have.

As an example of how coveting can spring from either a love of self or from a love of the world, I invite you to consider the desire we may have for our own way to be followed, and we say, “I want it my way”. Operating from a love of the world “I want it my way” wishes for everyone and everything to operate in the way that we think is best because that will make the external world work best for us, and also everyone will be happier that way because our way is best. On the other hand, operating from the more harmful love of self, “I want it my way” wishes for everything to be done our way because the world and everybody and everything in it should be subservient to us as the center of the universe.

What is the impact of this covetous desire for things to be done our way? It leaves us feeling unhappy at the state the world, and it leaves us assuming the worst of our spouse, leaders, and neighbors who are doing their best in whatever role they have in our relationships and in our community.

The thing is, whatever the origin of our coveting might be, and whatever additional Commandments our coveting leads us to break, it takes away our happiness and enjoyment of life. If we are left wishing for something else, then we are by definition not happy with what we have—we are NOT happy!

I don’t want my enjoyment of life taken away, do you? I want to be happy! I want to be happy with what I have. Don’t you? Here’s another nugget of wisdom for you: *You won’t be happy with what you want if you are not happy with what you already have*. So, how can we be happy with what we have—with what God has given us? What can we do about it?

Well, we need some way of reducing our coveting, right? In our reading from the *Doctrine of Life*, we heard about a positive feedback loop that can be applied to any of the Ten Commandments, and we are going to apply it to coveting today. A simple example of a positive feedback loop is this: chickens lay eggs; eggs make more chickens, and these lay more eggs, etc.

In our reading, the first part of the loop says that, when we abstain from evil, then we will come into more goodness. This is like shooing away those pesky bird thoughts before they build a nest—shoo those evils away, and then the Lord can work through you.

Well, the second part of this positive feedback loop is that, when we practice goodness, evil is repelled. Now, the way that this works is when we shun a specific evil, we then come into a specific opposite good, and when we put specific goods into practice, the opposite evil is shooed away. The evil in question today is coveting, and I came up with two opposite goods to shoo away the evil of coveting: gratitude and generosity.

First let's talk about how gratitude can be used. Gratitude, from the Latin *gratas* is the good feeling we have toward someone who has done something for us. In order to have this good feeling, we must be aware of what we have. If we are busy being aware of what we have, then we will not have time to feel that we are lacking anything. The apostle Paul said, "In everything, give thanks." What if, no matter what you were going through, you could find something to be grateful for, and especially, grateful to God. Gratitude and coveting cannot exist in the same space in our minds or hearts, so finding a way to be sincerely grateful for something as simple as the socks you are wearing will keep that covetous desire away. If we are intent on finding ways to be grateful for our spouses and the various types of leaders in our community, then it will be difficult or impossible for "I want it my way" to coexist in the same heartspace. Try it! Think of your "I want it my way", or think of some discontent you may be experiencing, but then force yourself to find something you are grateful for, and really feel that gratitude *sincerely*. In that moment that you are sincerely grateful, you cannot at the same time be coveting.

How about generosity? Well, of course a desire to share what we have is opposite to covetous desire. Our reading from *Divine Love and Wisdom* said it beautifully with these words: *Love consists in willing what one has to be another's*. If our focus and intention is on sharing what we have with those around us, then the coveting that wishes to have what belongs to another will be unable to coexist in the same spiritual space. I don't think this is talking about giving away all of our money or material possessions. Those things don't actually matter. I think it's talking about spiritual possessions of love and happiness and an understanding of the Lord's Word that brings peace and not division.

Would you like to be content with what God has given you in life? Practice repelling covetous desire with generosity and gratitude. And one final antidote for covetous thoughts that enter our minds are true ideas from the Lord's Word. Jesus modeled this when He was tempted three times by the devil in the wilderness. So, we will end with some words of the Lord for those times that you are wanting what others have or when you are wanting things done your way:

In Luke: "One's life does not consist in the abundance of the things."

In Matthew: "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness ..."

In the Psalms: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want"

In Matthew: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven ... for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"

Readings

Genesis 37, portions

3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age. Also he made him a tunic of many colors. 4 But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him.

5 Now Joseph had a dream, and he told it to his brothers; and they hated him even more. And his brothers envied him.

12 Then his brothers went to feed their father's flock in Shechem. 13 And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers feeding the flock in Shechem? Come, I will send you to them."

So he said to him, "Here I am."

14 Then he said to him, "Please go and see if it is well with your brothers and well with the flocks, and bring back word to me." So he sent him out of the Valley of Hebron, and he went to Shechem.

18 Now when they saw him afar off, even before he came near them, they conspired against him to kill him. 19 Then they said to one another, "Look, this dreamer is coming! 20 Come therefore, let us now kill him and cast him into some pit; and we shall say, 'Some wild beast has devoured him.' We shall see what will become of his dreams!"

21 But Reuben heard it, and he delivered him out of their hands, and said, "Let us not kill him." 22 And Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood, but cast him into this pit which is in the wilderness, and do not lay a hand on him"—that he might deliver him out of their hands, and bring him back to his father.

23 So it came to pass, when Joseph had come to his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the tunic of many colors that was on him. 24 Then they took him and cast him into a pit. And the pit was empty; there was no water in it.

25 And they sat down to eat a meal. Then they lifted their eyes and looked, and there was a company of Ishmaelites, coming from Gilead with their camels, bearing spices, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry them down to Egypt. 26 So Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27 Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother and our flesh." And his brothers listened. 28 Then Midianite traders passed by; so the brothers pulled Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

Secrets of Heaven 6204. It is important to know, though, that the evil that enters our thoughts does not hurt us at all. Spirits from hell are constantly pouring evil in, and angels constantly repel it. But when evil enters our will, it does harm us, because it then issues in action, whenever outward restraints do not hold us back. Evil enters our will when we keep it in our thoughts, when we agree to it, and especially when we commit it and then enjoy it.

Diving Love and Wisdom 47. Divine love and wisdom cannot but be and have expression in others it creates. The essence of love is not to love self, but to love others and through love to be conjoined with them. It is also the essence of love to be loved by others, for thus is conjunction achieved. The essential ingredient in all love consists in conjunction; indeed in it consists its life, which we call pleasure, gratification, delight, sweetness, bliss, happiness and felicity. Love consists in willing what one has to be another's, and in feeling the other's delight as delight within oneself. That is what it is to love. In contrast, to feel one's own delight in another, and not the other's delight within oneself, is not to love; for this is loving self, whereas the first is loving the neighbor.

Doctrine of Life 70, 71. Now, since what is evil and what is good are two opposite things, it follows that if we turn our backs on something evil as a sin we come into something good that is the opposite of that evil. [For example,] the goodness that is opposite to the evil meant by killing, is loving our neighbor. Since this goodness and that evil are opposites, it follows that the [evil thing] is repelled by the [good thing]. Two opposites cannot be one, as heaven and hell cannot be one.