

“You Shall Not Covet”

The Ninth and Tenth Commandments

A Sermon by Rev. Peter Buss, Jr.

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“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.” (Exodus 20:17)

A “one-two punch.” I’d like to begin today with a phrase that you’ve likely heard before, but perhaps haven’t heard in the context of the Ten Commandments: *a one-two punch*. It comes, as we know, from the boxing arena—not the most spiritual or even uplifting of sports. It means, “a combination of two blows delivered in rapid succession, especially a left lead followed by a right cross” (*American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition*, copyright 2000, Houghton Mifflin Company). A second definition takes this phrase out of the boxing arena and applies it elsewhere, saying that it has come to mean, “An especially forceful or effective combination or sequence of two things” (*Ibid.*).

The reason for introducing this phrase is that the Lord seems to deliver a powerful “one-two punch” to us in the form of the ninth and tenth commandments. These are the commandments against coveting. “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s” (Exodus 20:17). The Writings for the New Church make it very clear that these are two commandments, not one. As we’ll discover, there are some very important reasons for them being seen as two—even though, as today, they’re most often explored together (see *True Christian Religion* 325).

Before looking at those reasons, we focus first on the “punch” part. Picture, if you will, a skilled boxer going after his opponent, and listen to this series of teachings relating to these commandments: “These two commandments look back to all the commandments that precede them. They teach and enjoin that we are not to do evil [punch number one] and that we are also not to crave doing evil [punch number two]” (*True Christian Religion* 326).

It goes on to say, “Someone who does not do evil things but nevertheless craves doing them is still doing them” (*Ibid.*). Then comes another combination of hard sayings from Scripture:

- Punch one: “Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28).
- Punch two: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence” (Matthew 23:25).

The call to look within, with honesty and humility, is not always easy. We know that there are things going on in our inner world that are not good. We know that we crave certain

things, entertain certain lusts, ponder some terrible thoughts, and act in hypocritical ways at times.

Then there's the fact that these two commandments are a summary of all the other commandments. Thinking still of punches being absorbed, we are reminded of the fact that most of the commandments are spoken of in the negative: "You shall not not...murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness." They are, if you can forgive the wording, "punchy". This teaching about the commandments against coveting being a summary of all the rest of the commandments goes on to say, "[They] look back to the spiritual meaning of all the commandments previously given, adding that we are not to crave doing those evil things" (*True Christian Religion* 327).

What are those spiritual meanings? We won't review them all, but we can take a couple of examples: You shall not murder: Not only does this mean killing another human being, but it includes unjust anger, resentment, hatred, revenge, malicious gossip, and character assassination. It also means resisting the impulses that come into us from the hells to react and act in hurtful ways when things don't go our way, or others don't give us the respect we believe we're due.

Or we could take the commandment against adultery. Even those who are faithful in the narrow sense of committing adultery would have trouble saying that they've got this commandment covered. For it also includes unrestrained lust, the desire to possess another person for selfish purposes, deceit, hypocrisy, and cruelty to someone of the opposite sex. It includes all that is dirty and ugly between the sexes. It delves into any ways that we dishonor the institution of marriage. And in a deeper way, it even gets into the causes of all these things, namely our negative desires brought into an unlawful coupling with false reasonings which justify them.

The same could be said of stealing, or taking the Lord's name in vain, or failing to honor the Sabbath day, when spiritually understood. It is a daunting list of don'ts. And it can feel at times like we are being pummeled by the Word of the Lord—"a left hand punch followed by a right cross, an especially forceful sequence" of ideas that can cause guilt.

Commandments of love. We know, however, that the intent of these commandments—the two commandments against coveting, and all of the commandments as a package, is not to heap a mountain of guilt on us. At the heart of every single command is the Lord's desire that we experience happiness rather than sadness. They are given to us out of an ardent desire for healthy relationships between us and other people. They serve as the means by which we cooperate with our God on the journey of spiritual growth, with the ultimate goal of our salvation.

To fully absorb the goodness that lies within these commandments, we turn our attention to three powerful teachings, all related to the commandments against coveting, which demonstrate what the Lord wants us to take away from this study of the Ten Commandments as a package, for these two final commandments are a summary.

Love of self and love of the world. The first of these three teachings says that these two commandments forbid everything that flows from love of the world and the love of self (*Apocalypse Explained* 1021). This is the reason that there are two commandments and not one. The ninth commandment, you shall not covet your neighbor's house, deals

with love of the world—the belongings of others that we may want for ourselves, and also an unbalanced focus on this world, together with its pleasures and indulgences (*Apocalypse Explained* 1022). The tenth commandment deals with the love of self. The specific people or animals mentioned give depth and color to the ways that the love of self manifests itself: they are all symbolic of one person rather than many. Wife, servants, ox and donkey stand for, respectively, each person's internal affections, external affections, the desire to learn, natural or innate goodness (*Ibid.*). The command not to covet all that means not wanting to dominate another human being—not to steer all that goodness to ourselves alone. It's a deeper way of looking at the ways in which one person uses another. The Writings call it "the love of ruling from the love of self" and they identify it as "the universal love of hell" (*Conjugial Love* 262).

Having established that we're talking about love of the world and the love of self in these two commandments against coveting, we can then absorb another teaching that flows from it. It says, "There are two loves from which all lusts spring and flow forth perpetually like streams from their fountains. These loves are called the love of the world and the love of self" (*Apocalypse Explained* 1021). It is essentially the same message as stated in the gospel of Matthew, concerning what defiles a person. The Lord says,

"Those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a person. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man" (Matthew 15:18-20).

All that we need to do is recognize that murders, adulteries, thefts, etc. stem from some manifestation of love of the world and the love of self, and we're ready to absorb the truth that these two commandments are talking about the origins of *all* that is evil and hurtful. This is the Lord being entirely inclusive at the end of the Ten Commandments, saying in effect, you have to look at what causes you to do the hurtful things you do.

Logical consequences. Nevertheless, it is one thing to say "Don't!" and another to explain why. We know that the Word contains story after story of the logical consequences of people doing forbidden things. The reason is to illustrate the "why." Why not act in selfish and worldly ways? Because we, and other people, won't like the consequences.

The story of the Garden of Eden is a good place to start. Eve and Adam desired—coveted if you will—the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When they took it, they became embarrassed, sought to hide, and were eventually kicked out of the garden (Genesis 3). How telling it is that "forbidden fruit" has become synonymous with that part of us that wants what we're told we can't have?

We heard the story of Gehazi's greed. Elisha's servant pursued Naaman because he wanted some of the thank you gifts that his master had refused in exchange for healing Naaman of his leprosy (Elisha knew the Lord did the miracle and gave Him the credit). Gehazi ended up acting deceptively to get some silver and some changes of clothing from Naaman, and then lied outright to Elisha. But we know he was discovered, and received the punishment of leprosy—the exact correspondential or external manifestation of the internal uncleanness that had taken hold of him (2 Kings 5).

King David lusted after Bathsheba, when he saw her bathing from his rooftop. He coveted her, leading him to commit adultery with her, knowing full well that she was married to another. The logical consequences for him were three-fold: the child born between them from that adulterous relationship died, symbolizing that nothing good and useful can be borne of adultery, murder, deceit, and all the other things at play in the story; David had strife within his family—something we know happens in the wake of most adulterous relationships; and David was at war with his enemies for the rest of his kingship, symbolizing the battles any person has with the hells as a result of willfully doing what the Lord forbids (2 Samuel 11).

Just one more story will be enough. Ahab coveted the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite (1 Kings 21). Not only did this coveting lead to stealing, bearing false witness, and murder, but it also ended with a sentencing of Ahab and all of his male descendents to death.

The Word of the Lord seeks to show by means of these and many other stories, the painful truth that plays itself out in the lives of all people who succumb to the promptings of selfishness and worldliness. It doesn't end well. Pain and unhappiness result. Relationships are ruined. Loneliness and guilt are byproducts. Not only that, but the trajectory of consistent actions of this nature is hell, where all are out for themselves alone, and where there is no peace or harmony amongst people, but only distrust and fear and backstabbing and cruelty.

Heaven and hell: giving vs. taking. Which brings us to the final point for today. Where is this all leading? We've looked at the Ten Commandments over the last ten weeks. If we could step back and absorb the fundamental take-away that the Lord is giving us by means of all the messages contained within this package, it would be that He wants us to experience heaven, rather than hell.

So it is that we project ourselves into the life to come, to the nature of heaven and the nature of hell. We heard a teaching which frames the fundamental difference by using two words: "sharing" vs. "taking":

In the heavens there is a sharing of all with each and of each with all. Such sharing goes forth from the two loves of heaven, which are...love to the Lord and love towards the neighbor. To share their delights is the very nature of these loves... It is different for love for oneself and love for the world. Love for oneself takes away and carries off all the pleasure of others and diverts them to itself because it has only its own welfare in mind. Love of the world wants the possessions of the neighbor to be its own. So these loves by nature want to destroy pleasures for other people. (*Heaven and Hell* 399)

Thinking of heaven first, I ask you to consider the joy which can come in the context of some of your closest relationships, be it husband and wife, brother and sister, or friend to friend. Think about the exchange of time, energy, listening, effort, and love that comes with any of these relationships that stand the test of time. In all of them there is "a sharing." If any relationship is to progress, there has to be giving on both sides, some level of devoting oneself to the happiness of the other.

This is a perfect example of the way things work in heaven. People there thrive on doing more for others than is expected. They see a need, and they devote their energy to fill it. Angels, or the people who live in heaven, love to serve—to give of their talents and energy so that others will benefit.

Then there is the opposite: All of us have experienced a one-sided relationship, where it's all about what the other person wants us to do for them, and there never seems to be reciprocation. Without necessarily thinking of those people as evil, we can see a glimpse of the mainstay of hell: Instead of sharing, there is a constant taking. Each person, instead of being a center from which radiates goodness, is more like a magnet, or a sponge, or a black hole which absorbs and destroys all light and happiness.

All these ideas are particular teachings which fall under the general teaching of the ninth and tenth commandments. They are the Lord's way of taking us from blind obedience into conscious obedience—of inspiring us to take another look at the rest of the Commandments, and the rest of the Word, and see a need to look beyond the words themselves to the very causes of things. We are to obey internally as well as externally; we are to be givers instead of takers; we are to consider the logical consequences of our actions—in the specific situation, and also in the grand scope of our salvation; we are to cooperate with the Lord to make heaven, at least some small manifestation of it, a reality in our relationships and experience of life, even in this world. This is the Lord's powerful one-two punch—not with us as the target, but with all that causes pain and unhappiness in our experience.

We close with a powerful promise of the Lord relating to all His commandments:

“The LORD will greatly bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance— only if you carefully obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe with care all these commandments which I command you today. For the LORD your God will bless you just as He promised you” (Deuteronomy 15:4-6). **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord's Word: Exodus 20:17; 2 Kings 5:20-27; Matthew 15:10-20; *True Christian Religion* 326; *Apocalypse Explained* 1021, *Heaven and Hell* 399.

Exodus 20

¹⁷“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; 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.”

2 Kings 5

²⁰But Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said, “Look, my master has spared Naaman this Syrian, while not receiving from his hands what he brought; but as the LORD lives, I will run after him and take something from him.” ²¹So Gehazi pursued Naaman. When Naaman saw him running after him, he got down from the chariot to meet him, and said, “Is all well?”

²²And he said, “All is well. My master has sent me, saying, ‘Indeed, just now two young men of the sons of the prophets have come to me from the mountains of Ephraim. Please give them a talent of silver and two changes of garments.’”

²³So Naaman said, “Please, take two talents.” And he urged him, and bound two talents of silver in two bags, with two changes of garments, and handed them to two of his servants; and they carried them on ahead of him. ²⁴When he came to the citadel, he took them from their hand, and stored them away in the house; then he let the men go, and they departed. ²⁵Now he went in and stood before his master. Elisha said to him, “Where did you go, Gehazi?”

And he said, “Your servant did not go anywhere.”

²⁶Then he said to him, “Did not my heart go with you when the man turned back from his chariot to meet you? Is it time to receive money and to receive clothing, olive groves and vineyards, sheep and oxen, male and female servants? ²⁷Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and your descendants forever.” And he went out from his presence leprous, as white as snow.

Matthew 15

¹⁰When He had called the multitude to Himself, He said to them, “Hear and understand: ¹¹Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.”

¹²Then His disciples came and said to Him, “Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?”

¹³But He answered and said, “Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch.”

¹⁵Then Peter answered and said to Him, “Explain this parable to us.”

¹⁶So Jesus said, “Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? ¹⁸But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. ¹⁹For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. ²⁰These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.”

True Christian Religion 326

These two commandments [against coveting] look back to all the preceding ones, and teach and command that evil actions must not be done, nor even longed for. They are therefore not merely for the external person, but also for the internal.

Apocalypse Explained 1021

There are two loves from which all lusts spring and flow forth perpetually like streams from their fountains. These loves are called the love of the world and the love of self... Now because the love of the world and the love of self are the foundations of all lusts, and all evil lusts are forbidden in these last two commandments, it follows that the ninth commandment forbids the lusts that flow from the love of the world, and the tenth commandment the lusts that flow from the love of self.

Heaven and Hell 399

We may gather the magnitude of heaven’s pleasure simply from the fact that for everyone there it is delightful to share their pleasure and bliss with someone else; and since everyone in the heavens is like this, we can see how immense heaven’s pleasure is....

This kind of sharing flows from the two loves of heaven, which as noted, are love for the Lord and love for our neighbor. These loves by nature want to share their pleasures. The reason love for the Lord is like this is that because the Lord’s love is a love of sharing everything it has with everyone, it intends the happiness of everyone. Much the same love exists in individuals who love Him, because the Lord is in them.... Love for our neighbor is like this as well.

It is different for love for oneself and love for the world. Love for oneself takes away and carries off all the pleasure of others and diverts them to itself because it has only its own welfare in mind. Love of the world wants the possessions of the neighbor to be its own. So these loves by nature want to destroy pleasures for other people. If they have any tendency to share, it is for their own interests and not for others.... We can see from this that love for oneself and love for the world are destructive of heavenly joy and are therefore diametrically opposed to heavenly loves, whose nature it is to share.

The Ten Commandments

Summary of Deeper Implications for Our Lives

(based on sermons presented at the Glenview New Church, January 17 to March 21)

1. You shall have no other gods before Me.

- Focusing on the one true God of the universe, who is the Lord Jesus Christ.
- Keeping our priorities in order: God, then people, then material possessions and pleasures, and finally our own position and power.
- We shouldn't allow anyone (ourselves included) or anything to be more important than the qualities of love, mercy, peace and goodness (the faces of God).

2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

- A true understanding of the Lord, encapsulated in His many names, can lead us to believe that He will do what He says He will do—every time without fail.
- We are to grow in our understanding of our God, so that we can stand in awe of His goodness, and humbly submit to His guidance.
- The Word is the work to which the Lord has ascribed His name. We honor that name by learning from it and living according to its dictates.
- We are not to blaspheme (believe or speak in negative ways regarding the Lord or His Word) or profane (live contrary to what we know the Lord teaches).
- We are to love everything that comes from God.

3. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

- We are called to “remember” the Lord and the things of spiritual life.
- The goal of any spiritual observances, on Sunday or other times, is to keep certain

spiritual principles firmly in mind, so that they come to “reign universally” within us.

- Truly remembering (doing) the things of spiritual life tends to lead to peace, whereas forgetting tends to lead to anxiety and suffering.
- The cycle of Sabbaths, stretching out over a lifetime, stands for the process of spiritual growth or regeneration. Remembering to engage in that process is also what the Sabbath is about.

4. Honor your father and your mother.

- We are called to honor, or value, or look for the good in what our parents did for us, even if there were (are) flaws in the relationship we have with them. A key reason is that it gets us outside of ourselves to consider the perspective of others. It also lays a foundation for higher considerations of what the Lord does for us as Heavenly Father, and what the Church does for us as spiritual Mother.
- The first three Commandments are about loving the Lord; the rest of the commandments that follow are about loving the neighbor.

5. You shall not murder.

- This is the first of the commandments relating to our interactions with others. It is purposely framed in a “cease to do evil” way—cease to do harm first, and then learn to do good.
- Murder includes unjust anger, resentment, hatred, revenge, malicious gossip, and character assassination.
- It also includes doing damage to a person's beliefs, and their sense of self (safety, usefulness, etc.)
- It also includes hating the Lord.

- Destructive anger, and all that goes along with it, comes from hell, and wells up inside of us when we allow concern for ourselves or for the things of this world to dominate.
- The opposite of murder is to be a life giver—to build up instead of cut down, to honor and respect, to approach in a spirit of teamwork and humility.

6. You shall not commit adultery.

- The essence of this command is the Lord's desire to lead us away from hurt and the destruction of relationships, toward happiness—especially in the context of marriage.
- Adultery is associated with unrestrained lust, ugliness, an unmerciful attitude, the desire to possess and use another person for selfish purposes, deceit, hypocrisy, and cruelty.
- On a deeper level, the command is against unlawful couplings, including an evil desire together with twisted truths that justify it, or bringing something pure and clean into association with something foul.
- We are called by this commandment to shun wandering lusts, to strive instead for what is pure and clean and beautiful in relationships between the sexes, to honor the beauty that is inherent in marriage, and pray to the Lord to create a clean heart within us.

7. You shall not steal.

- Theft includes all ways of taking what doesn't belong to us including illegal ways of earning a profit, defrauding others, not paying workers their due, and even robbing someone of his or her sense of safety or innocence through abuse and the like.
- On a spiritual level, to steal includes taking away the true ideas that someone has, by either convincing them of something false, or using truth in hypocritical ways and thereby turning people off from those truths.

- On the deepest level this commandment forbids us to take credit to ourselves for what God does in our lives. This includes personal qualities, successes, and blessings.
- In the opposite sense, we are called to trust in the Lord, believing in His guidance, and allowing Him to plant within us a generous spirit.

8. You shall not bear false witness.

- Lies become harmful when the intention behind the lie is harmful—when we lie to protect ourselves, when we are embarrassed or wish to hide something about ourselves, when we fear losing our reputation, when we want to be accepted, and so on.
- Bearing false witness includes the use of truths from the Word for unintended purposes—to justify self-serving ends.
- Lies separate us from others; they create a wedge, and they destroy trust.
- In the opposite sense, we are called to stand firm in the truth.

9. You shall not covet your neighbor's house.

10. You shall not covet...anything that is your neighbor's.

- These two commandments stand as a summary of the other commandments, forbidding not only the external expressions of what is forbidden, but the internal longing for those things.
- In their essence, these two commandments forbid the longings that arise from love of the world and love of self—the two loves from which all that is evil and hurtful spring.
- At heart, those who covet desire to “take” from others, and destroy the joy of others, turning everything inward toward themselves, like a black hole, or a magnet, or a sponge. Those who obey these commandments desire to share or give to others, being more like the sun that radiates heat and light, delighting primarily in being useful and causing joy.

