

## **The Ten Commandments - 9 and 10**

In this last of my talks on the Commandments I'm dealing with the ninth and tenth, concerning covetousness. They read: "You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is your neighbour's." In many Churches these are, I know, combined into a single Commandment and listed as the tenth. And the reason for this, is that at the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, the Protestant reformers divided the first Commandment into two, in order to give added stress to the evil of idolatry, and joined the last two together. Originally they were two, but the Reformers made them one. And yet, because two very distinct things are involved here, the original separation is preferred and I shall refer to them as the ninth and tenth Commandments.

The first thing to note about them is how they differ from the first eight. All of those deal with outward actions and obvious evils. These two deal with inward thoughts: with things that go through our minds; with evils that are within the heart of a person and which may never be seen by other people. And in this regard they lay by far the hardest task upon us. 'To control one's actions is one thing. To control one's thoughts and feelings and emotions is quite another.' (Barclay). And yet this is what these Commandments concerning covetousness ask of us.

This then is how they differ. They speak of evil in the mind and heart of a person; of thoughts and desires that come to us; of private longing for the possessions or the wife of another. And in doing so they emphatically broaden our responsibilities and show us that it's not just actual actions which are concerned in keeping the Commandments, but the things we would love to do as well. It is as if the Lord is saying: "Don't think that because you haven't stolen the goods of your neighbour you haven't broken the Commandments. To covet them is just as bad." Not only do we need to control our actions, but we need to - and must - control our thoughts and desires as well. Here is what these last two Commandments are saying to us.

Swedenborg wrote of them: "These two commandments look back to all the commandments that precede them. They teach and enjoin that we are not to do evil and that we are also not to crave doing evil. Therefore the Ten Commandments are

not only for the outer self but also for the inner self. Someone who does not do evil things but nevertheless craves doing them is still doing them." *True Christianity 326*

The teaching is of course plain enough. And yet how many people are facing up to it? Facing up to the fact that intention and desire, if evil, are just as damnable, as if the act itself were committed? The Lord taught that to lust after a person was to commit adultery with them already in one's heart. But how many of us really accept that this is so? He also taught that to harbour hatred, to be angry, and to bear a grudge, is to murder a person in one's heart. Again, how many of us really accept that this is so? Our tendency is to accept that, yes, the outward act constitutes sin; but not the inward desire. But this is not what the Lord says. Sin is involved at both levels, and we are to face up to a responsibility in both cases.

Earlier in my talk I spoke of preference for the original numbering of the Ten Commandments which separates the evil of covetousness into two. And you may wonder why this is so. At first glance there seems to be very little difference between the law "not to covet the neighbour's house", and the further injunction "not to covet the neighbour's wife, his manservant, his maidservant; his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbour's". Both prohibitions are warnings against envy and jealousy and against the lusting after those things which belong to another. Why then separate them into two?

Let us for a moment look at them a little more closely. The first warning is essentially about possessions. "You shall not covet your neighbour's house". It talks of the things of the world. It speaks of our discontentment. It warns of the constant chasing after things, so characteristic of our age; of the endless pursuit of wealth and comforts which is going on all around us and in which, to a greater or lesser extent, we find ourselves caught up in. It specifically addresses itself to man's love of the world, and to the potentially insatiable desire we all share for acquisition; for new and different, and bigger and better possessions.

The second warning is a different one. Its central theme is self-aggrandizement. What it talks about is power and control over people. As against the first warning which addresses itself to man's love of the world, this second warning is a warning about the love of self, and the desire to dominate over and control others. And it is in this respect that they are different. There are two basic loves which are ever seeking to

raise their heads in our lives and these are the love of the world and the love of self. And here, in these ninth and tenth Commandments, attention is directed to them. This is why we prefer the original numbering of the Commandments and the separation of this law about covetousness into two. The thing is that two separate things are being treated of. In these last two Commandments the Lord is warning us of the need to resist, first, the promptings of the love of the world, and second, the promptings of the love of self. "You shall not covet your neighbour's house". That's one thing. And then He goes on to say: "You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is your neighbour's." And that is the second thing. To resist the desire to control and dominate the lives of others and to have them for oneself.

Concerning the love of the world, the Lord Himself had much to say which you and I do well to reflect upon. "For what will it profit a man" He asked, "if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mt 16:26). "Take no thought for your life" He counselled "what you shall eat... nor yet for your body, what you shall put on. For your heavenly Father knows you have need of all these things. But seek you first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." (Mt 6:25-33). "Take heed" He said "and beware of covetousness; for a man's life consists not in the abundance of things which he possesses." (Luke 12:15) There is, as well, the parable of the rich fool, and so it goes on.

Even more insidious and subtle is the love of self: the love which makes much of one's own importance; the love which is constantly making us worry about our standing in the eyes of other people; the love which would have us yearn for praise and recognition, which has no respect for the thinking and viewpoints of others, which is intolerant, and even contemptuous of those who do not favour us or let us have our way.

We are all born with a tendency towards the love of self. It is present with everyone without exception. "Every person is born of his parents into the evils of the love of self and of the world". (*Arcana Celestia* 8550) Our dominant inclinations lie in that direction. We tend naturally to love ourselves, to think of ourselves, to wish well to ourselves, to favour ourselves. This is so with people everywhere. And it must be resisted. This is why the Lord said,

"He that loves his life shall lose it, and he that hates his life in this world shall keep it for life eternal." (John 12.25) Man's own life is his tendency to exalt and love himself, a tendency which, when not resisted, comes to consume a person completely. "The love of self" wrote Swedenborg "is such, that in proportion as rein is given to it, it rushes on, and at last to the Divine throne itself, so as to want to be a god." (*Arcana Celestia* 6878)

I repeat the point that this is something that is present in every one of us. We all have this tendency to live our lives and to do things, not from the point of view of the service we may be rendering our fellow-man, but from what we can get out of it and from the point of view of the benefits that will possibly come to us. We like people who flatter us and agree with us and dislike those who, irrespective of whether what they say is right or not, disagree with us. So often we find ourselves doing things for the sake of a good image and to create the right impression. We want to be looked up to and admired, and we imagine ourselves in positions of importance and power. Such is the love of self to which our attention is specifically directed in the tenth Commandment; a love which at all times must be resisted.

This is the last of the talks on the subject of the Commandments. I have tried to demonstrate how important they are and how far-reaching are their implications for us. As we have gone along I have constantly drawn on the theological Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg where, in several places, the Commandments are treated of. We have spoken of deeper, spiritual meanings within the Commandments, which Swedenborg unfolds for us. I have said that the Commandments are as important today as they were when they were first given. Times change, certainly. But what does not change is our need to shun and resist those evils enumerated in the Commandments. And insofar as we do this the Lord Himself can be present in our lives bringing blessing and happiness.

[The Swedenborg Programme – Number 123.](http://www.swedenborg.com.au)

<http://www.swedenborg.com.au>