

## THE TENTH COMMANDMENT – A CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

### *“Thou shalt not covet”*

#### INTRODUCTION

Has anyone ever coveted or been envious of another because they had lots of number twos to use in their math applications? Or the number five? Or any number? Probably not. Why is that? It is because numbers are not objects or images on a page of homework; they are *ideas*, ideas available to anyone at any time at any place. No one needs to feel deprived of numbers. There is no reason to desire or covet them. They are within consciousness, mental ideas. This is a hint as to what Christian Science teaches about the ever-availability of spiritual ideas, the true objects and creation of the divine Mind, God. More on that later.

The Tenth Commandment is unique because it forbids a certain way of *thinking*, rather than a certain way of *acting*. This prepares us to learn that our thinking determines our experience. Thinking includes ideas, and ideas in consciousness are infinite and available to all because they are not material and limited.

Basically, what does “covet” mean? It means to have an extremely strong desire, or wish, to possess something. Most likely it is something owned by another person. *Covet* is similar in meaning to other words, such as *envy*, *desire*, *lust*, and *crave*. We will take a look at what the Bible and the writings of Mary Baker Eddy say about each of those terms as we go along.

#### BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

The full text of the Tenth Commandment found in Exodus 20 (King James’ Version) reads:

*“The shalt not covet thy neighbour’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbours.”*

We find a helpful explanation in *The Interpreter’s Bible*:

*“The Tenth Commandment – The word translated house really means ‘household,’ and the rest of the commandment is an explication of the scope of that word. . . . In the early days when the first Greek translation of the Hebrew text was made, the scholars used a word in Greek which clearly means ‘to set one’s heart upon a thing,’ and Deuteronomy uses another Hebrew word which makes it doubly sure that the intention here is to prohibit grasping thoughts that lead to grasping deeds.” (The Interpreter’s Bible: Volume One, p. 988)*

One early Bible character that illustrates the negative consequences and shame of “grasping deeds” is David. David is known as the courageous shepherd boy who challenged Goliath and was a devoted friend, among other good qualities. He loved God. He was made King. But when he became besotted by Bathsheba, who was already married to Uriah, he forgot the Tenth Commandment and behaved horribly, against his better nature, and arranged for Uriah to go to the front of a battle, where he was killed. David then took Bathsheba as his own. But when the prophet Nathan confronted him about his deed, David was ashamed. He and Bathsheba lost their

first child, though later were blessed by the son Solomon, who became a wise king. See this full story in chapters 11 and 12 of II Samuel.

Another “grasper” who coveted was Ahab, who wanted the vineyard of a neighbor, Naboth. He tried to buy the vineyard from him, but Naboth explained that the vineyard had been an inheritance from his fathers and could not part with it. Ahab’s evil wife, Jezebel, took matters into her own hands. She arranged for Naboth to be wrongfully accused of blasphemy, for which he was stoned to death. Afterward, Ahab, at Jezebel’s insistence, took possession of the vineyard he coveted. This time God sent another prophet, Elijah, to Ahab. The punishment was quite severe for both Ahab and Jezebel. See I King, chapter 21 for the full story.

Covetousness can often be the motive behind *greed*, which is a quality of being extremely grasping. The book of Proverbs warns of greed:

*“He that is greedy of gain troubleth his own house.” (Proverb 15:27)*

*“The desire of the slothful killeth him; for his hands refuse to labour. He coveteth greedily all the day long; but the righteous giveth and spareth not.” (Proverb 21:25, 26)*

Why be greedy, when God tells us He will supply what we really need. We just have to learn to trust Him, as the Israelites were taught:

*“Delight thyself also in the Lord; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him, and he shall bring it to pass.” (Psalm 37:4, 5)*

The Interpreter’s Bible further explains the uniqueness of the Tenth Commandment and what it would have meant for the Hebrews of Old Testament times:

*“The commandment is one of the early insights into the fact that the inner life of man determines destiny. Here we step from the outer world of act and word, of crime and punishment, into the secret place where all good and evil begin, the heart of man.*

*“The inwardness of the last words of the Decalogue make them the very threshold of the New Testament. There is no doubt that Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, had the Ten Commandments in mind.” (The Interpreter’s Bible: Volume One, p. 988)*

## **JESUS AND THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Jesus was very clear in his Sermon on the Mount that God should come first not only in our hearts, but should be the one and only God we worship:

*“No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.” (Matthew 6:24)*

“Mammon” refers to wealth or riches. We are not to make idols of wealth nor do we want to become slaves to it. But does this mean we cannot have wealth? God certainly would want His

children to share in the abundance of His riches. Jesus doesn't preclude abundance, but he tells us what our priorities should be:

*"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matthew 6:33)*

However, Jesus explicitly denounced the sin of covetousness. In Luke 12, we read that Jesus was approached by a man who said unto him *"Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me."* Jesus replied: *"Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you?"* Then he laid out this warning:

*"Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of things which he possesseth." (Luke 12:15)*

In the Gospel of Mark, we see "covetousness" included in a list of evil things:

*"Out of the heart of men . . . proceed evil thoughts . . . covetousness . . . these evil things come from within, and defile the man." (Mark 7:21-23)*

Again, we see the idea that while the motive of covetousness may be unseen by others, it is nevertheless harmful to man.

Mary Baker Eddy, the Discoverer and Founder of Christian Science, writes in her textbook, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*:

*"Jesus declared that to look with desire on forbidden objects was to break a moral precept. He laid great stress on the action of the human mind, unseen to the senses." (Science and Health, p. 234)*

It is not just material objects (or wives, or cattle, or houses!) that can stir up covetousness, but self-centered ambition for position or honors or attention can, as well. For instance, the mother of two disciples of Jesus (James and John) appealed to Jesus for her sons to sit on his right and left sides "in thy kingdom" (see Matthew 20:20-28). Another account of the episode indicates James and John approached Jesus on their own (see Mark 10:35-45). Jesus rightly refused to bestow this honor and the request stirred up resentment among the other disciples.

We also read in the New Testament what the Apostle Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Hebrews:

*"Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have." (Hebrews 13:5)*

## **CHRISTIAN SCIENCE AND THE TENTH COMMANDMENT**

*[NOTE: For those unfamiliar with the religion of Christian Science, which is NOT the same as Scientology!] you can read about it on the [Questions and Answers page.](#)]*

In the first creation story at the beginning of Genesis, we read:

*“And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.” (Genesis 1:31)*

“Very good.” In Christian Science, we learn this means that God’s man is complete, lacking nothing. He is, as the first chapter of Genesis tells us, made in the “image and likeness” of God. If this is true, how can this “reflection” be, or have, anything less than what God imparts to all? God is Spirit, as the Bible also tells us. Therefore, man is His spiritual idea, perfect as the Mind that made him and cares for him.

While mortals may feel lack and covet what others may seem to have, we each have a spiritual identity that includes all we need, especially qualities and talents uniquely expressed by each one.

In Christian Science, it is necessary to rid our thought of negative qualities that would hinder our spiritual growth, just as we would pull out weeds in a garden. Covetousness is certainly a weed we would not want in our garden of thoughts. Mary Baker Eddy writes:

*“Envy, evil thinking, evil speaking, covetousness, lust, hatred, malice, are always wrong, and will break the rule of Christian Science and prevent its demonstration.” (Miscellaneous Writings, p. 19)*

It is important in the practice of Christian Science that we obey the Ten Commandments and learn to discipline our thoughts so that our actions conform to these laws. In his book *“The Decalogue; Its Spiritual Significance,”* the author Ames Nowell writes on the Tenth Commandment:

*“As long as one believes that there is something ‘out there’ apart from God, good, and one is coveting it, this Commandment is being broken . . . the allness of God is actually being denied.”*

Mary Baker Eddy also writes:

*“Self-ignorance, self-will, self-righteousness, lust, covetousness, envy, revenge, are foes to grace, peace, and progress; they must be met manfully and overcome, or they will uproot all happiness.” (Miscellaneous Writings, p. 118)*

There are specific sins which can contribute to covetousness and are just as important to overcome. These are greed, envy and jealousy, lust, and wrong desires. We will take a closer look at these terms below:

## **ENVY**

Envy, like covetousness, is simply wanting what someone else has, but it often includes some resentment, or even hate, toward the person who owns what we would like to have.

From my book on the Ten Commandments, we also learn about *jealousy*: “*It is often confused with envy. Jealousy is the fear that another person might take away something we believe belongs only to us (such as our best friend!). Even though it is different from envy, it is still a negative emotion that we should cast out. Shakespeare called these feelings ‘the green-eyed monster.’ It can sure seem that way!*” (“*First Lessons in Christian Science, Volume One: The Ten Commandments,*” p. 60)

*“Pride, envy, or jealousy seems on most occasions to be the master of ceremonies, ruling out primitive Christianity.” (Science and Health, p. 64)*

You might think, if envy and jealousy are only in my thoughts and I’m not hurting anyone, why are they wrong? Because we do hurt ourselves by indulging these sins. And God needs you, His cherished child, to be pure of heart to be fit for service to mankind! Mary Baker Eddy lays it out:

*“Envy is the atmosphere of hell.” (Message of 1901, p. 3)*

*“Envy, the great red dragon of this hour, would obscure the light of Science.” (Miscellaneous Writings, p. 254)*

*“A moral question may hinder the recovery of the sick. Lurking error, lust, envy, revenge, malice, or hate will perpetuate or even create the belief in disease.” (Science and Health, p. 419)*

Fortunately for mankind, the teachings of Christian Science give us the tools we need to lessen and destroy these sinful thoughts.

*“You must give much time to self-examination and correction; you must control appetite, passion, pride, envy, evil-speaking, resentment.” (Miscellaneous Writings, p. 137)*

*“The anatomy of Christian Science teaches when and how to probe the self-inflicted wounds of selfishness, malice, envy, and hate.” (Science and Health, p. 462)*

*“Man’s enslavement to the most relentless masters – passion, selfishness, envy, hatred, and revenge – is conquered only by a mighty struggle. Every hour of delay makes the struggle more severe. If man is not victorious over the passions, they crush out happiness, health, and manhood. Here Christian Science is the sovereign panacea, giving strength to the weakness of mortal mind, -- strength from the immortal and omnipotent Mind, -- and lifting humanity above itself into purer desires, even into spiritual power and good-will to man.” (Science and Health, p. 407)*

*“Are we clearing the gardens of thought by uprooting the noxious weeds of passion, malice, envy, and strife?” (Miscellaneous Writings, p. 343)*

There is that idea of weeding our “garden” of thoughts again. Most everyone understands the need to keep weeds out of a beloved garden. It is an on-going project, not something to do once and forget about it! Daily prayer is where we tend to our thoughts in our communion with our Father-Mother God. One way to push out the weeds of envy is with an “attitude of gratitude”!

*A grateful heart a garden is,  
Where there is always room  
For every lovely, Godlike grace  
To come to perfect bloom.  
-- (Hymn 3, Christian Science Hymnal)*

## **GREED**

Already touched upon in the Biblical Background section, *greed* is similar to covetousness. In *First Lessons in Christian Science, Volume One: The Ten Commandments*, I wrote:

*“Covetousness is often the motive behind greed, which is a quality of being extremely grasping – taking, eating, or buying way too much, certainly beyond what anyone would normally need. Greed, of course, is not a quality a Christian would want to express.”*

We need to learn to trust God to give us what we need. Mary Baker Eddy offers this guidance:

*“God gives you His spiritual ideas, and in turn, they give you daily supplies. Never ask for tomorrow: it is enough that divine Love is an ever-present help; and if you wait, never doubting, you will have all you need every moment. What a glorious inheritance is given to us through the understanding of omnipresent Love! More we cannot ask: more we do not want: more we cannot have. This sweet assurance is the “Peace, be still” to all human fears, to suffering of every sort. (Miscellaneous Writings, p. 307)*

*“At this immortal hour, all human hate, pride, greed, lust should bow and declare Christ’s power, and the reign of Truth and Life divine should make man’s being pure and blest.” (Miscellaneous Writings, p. 257)*

## **LUST**

Lust is an intense desire, or longing, for physical pleasure. Our senses demand to be entertained! We can become addicted to things we lust for, leaving us little time to think of anything else. Certainly, this is something we need to master. Mary Baker Eddy writes:

*“The Scriptures say: ‘Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.’ That which we desire and for which we ask, it is not always best for us to receive. In this case infinite Love will not grant the request.” (Science and Health, p. 10)*

*“Lust, dishonesty, sin, disable the student; they preclude the practice or efficient teaching of Christian Science, the truth of man’s being.” (First Church of Christ, Scientist and Miscellany, p. 4)*

*“The lust of the flesh and the pride of physical life must be quenched in the divine essence.” (Unity of Good, p. 39)*

*“HELL. Mortal belief; error; lust.” (Science and Health, p. 588)*

The Apostle Paul gave this advice:

*“Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.” (Galatians 5:16)*

As we “walk with Spirit,” which is God, we are protected from the myriad suggestions that would lead us into temptation of lustful practices. But it takes moment-by-moment alertness and a desire to be obedient.

## **WRONG DESIRES**

There is nothing wrong with having desires, but they need to be right and worthy. Our desires may not start off that way; they may be based on materialism. It’s humanly natural. But Christian Science teaches, as does Jesus, that we need a spiritual approach by turning to God first.

*“Desire is prayer; and no loss can occur from trusting God with our desires, that they may be moulded and exalted before they take form in words and in deeds.” (Science and Health, p. 1)*

*“Jesus declared that to look with desire on forbidden objects was to break a moral precept. He laid great stress on the action of the human mind, unseen to the senses.” (Science and Health, p. 234)*

Sometimes the answer to our prayers is that we do not get what we desire. We must humbly accept this. Perhaps it is a matter of not being the right time. We must trust God.

*“That which we desire and for which we ask, it is not always best for us to receive. In this case infinite Love will not grant the request.” (Science and Health, p. 10)*

*“Let the slave of wrong desire learn the lessons of Christian Science, and he will get the better of that desire, and ascend a degree in the scale of health, happiness, and existence.” (Science and Health, p. 407)*

What, then, would be the right kind of desires to yearn for and pray for? Mrs. Eddy tells us in the first chapter of Science and Health, “Prayer”:

*“What we most need is the prayer of fervent desire for growth in grace, expressed in patience, meekness, love, and good deeds.” (Science and Health, p. 4)*

Elsewhere she writes:

*“Prayer begets an awakened desire to be and do good.” (No and Yes, p. 39)*

*“Soul is the infinite source of bliss: only high and holy joy can satisfy immortal cravings.” (Miscellaneous Writings, p. 287)*

*“Happiness consists in being and in doing good; only what God gives, and what we give ourselves and others through His tenure, confers happiness.” (Message of 1902, p. 17)*

In her autobiography, Mary Baker Eddy shares how her early desires guided her life:

*"From my very childhood I was impelled, by a hunger and thirst after divine things, — a desire for something higher and better than matter, and apart from it, — to seek diligently for the knowledge of God as the one great and ever-present relief from human woe. The first spontaneous motion of Truth and Love, acting through Christian Science on my roused consciousness, banished at once and forever the fundamental error of faith in things material; for this trust is the unseen sin, the unknown foe, — the heart's untamed desire which breaketh the divine commandments. As says St. James: "Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." (Retrospection and Introspection, p. 31)*

## **SUMMARY**

Prayer to our Father-Mother God will help guide us in our journey on earth, and prove that we do not need to covet whatever our brothers and sisters may seem to have that we think should be ours as well. In one sense, it is right to claim our mutual heritage as God's children, each having all the grace and blessings that God bestows on His creation. As God's image and likeness, we reflect all that God is and has, seen and felt in the spiritual ideas within consciousness. There we find peace.

*“The sublime summary of an honest life satisfies the mind craving a higher good, and bathes it in the cool waters of peace on earth.” (Miscellaneous Writings, p. 227)*

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