



DO NOT COVET

DENNIS PRAGER

In the Ten Commandments, Commandments Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine are the ones that prohibit acts of evil – murder, adultery, stealing, and perjury. And then there is one commandment that prohibits the thing that leads to murder, adultery, stealing, and perjury. Which one is it? It's the last of the Ten: Do not covet anything that belongs to others – not their spouse, their house, their servants, their animals, or any of their property.

In order to understand this commandment, and its unique significance, the first thing to understand is that this is the only one of the Ten Commandments that legislates thought. All the other Commandments legislate behavior. In fact, of the 613 laws in the Five Books of Moses, virtually none prohibit thought.

Why, then, does the Ten Commandments include a law that prohibits a thought? Because it is coveting that so often leads to evil. Or, to put it another way, coveting is what leads to violating the preceding four commandments – the ones against murder, adultery, stealing, and perjury. Think about it. Why do people do those things? In most instances, it is because they covet something that belongs to another person. Obviously that is the reason people steal – thieves covet their victim's property. But it is also the reason for many murders. And coveting is obviously the reason for adultery – wanting the spouse of another person. As for perjury – or “bearing false witness” in the language of the Ten Commandments - that is done in order to cover up all these other crimes that are caused by coveting.

But in order to understand why coveting is the one thought that is prohibited in the Ten Commandments and one of the only thoughts prohibited in the entire Hebrew Bible, we need to understand what coveting means - and, equally important, what it doesn't mean.

To covet is much more than “to want.” The Hebrew verb, *lachmod* means to want to the point of seeking to take away and own – something that belongs to another person. Note that there are two operative elements here: “seeking to own,” and “belongs to another person.” “Seeking to own” does not mean just envying or, in the case of your neighbor's spouse, just lusting after. Neither envy nor lust is prohibited in the Ten Commandments. Uncontrolled envy and lust can surely lead to bad things, and they can both be psychologically and emotionally destructive, but neither one is prohibited in the Ten Commandments. Why? Because neither is the same as coveting. It is coveting that almost inevitably leads to stealing, to adultery, and sometimes even to murder.

Let me explain this in another way. The Tenth Commandment does not prohibit you from saying, “Wow, what a great house – or car or spouse – my neighbor has. I wish I had such a house – or car or spouse.” That may end up being destructive. But it may also end up being

constructive. How? It may spur you to work harder and improve your life so that you can obtain a house, car, or spouse like your neighbor's. It is when you want -- and seek to gain possession of -- the specific house, car, or spouse that belongs to another that evil ensues. And that is what the Tenth Commandment prohibits.

Therefore one of these Ten Commandments, these 10 basic rules of life, must be that we simply cannot allow ourselves to covet what belongs to our neighbor. Whatever belongs to another person must be regarded as sacrosanct. We cannot seek to own anything that belongs to another. Because only evil can come of it.

I'm Dennis Prager.