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# VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: TEN COMMANDMENTS

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## LECTURE 17: THE TENTH COMMANDMENT

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**The John Knox Institute**  
of Higher Education

*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

**John Knox Institute of Higher Education**

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# *Module*

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## **TEN COMMANDMENTS**

**18 LECTURES**

**REV. A.T. VERGUNST**

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## Lecture 17

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# THE TENTH COMMANDMENT

Young Saul was religious. He was zealous for God. He was one of those who thought he kept God's law perfectly. He claimed to be blameless in obedience. That is until God enrolled him in the divine law school. Then God made him face the 10th commandment. For the first time Saul understood that the 10th wasn't just the 10th. This commandment had a bearing on all other nine. Upon understanding that, Saul admitted that he died. He died to his self-esteem and his false hope. That discovery, however, was the beginning of a new life.

### TRANSCRIPT LECTURE 17

Welcome to the study of the tenth commandment. I have given this lecture the title, *The Command to Be Perfect in the Obedience of Each Commandment*. The words of the tenth are as follows, given by the Lord in Exodus 20, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor his donkey, nor anything that is thy neighbor's." Now any of you who have ever climbed a mountain knows what it feels like when you finally reach the top. [There is a] sense of relief when you have finally reached the top and see the beauty to which you have climbed, but I have to disappoint you that such will not be the feeling when we have finally reached the tenth commandment. Though it is the last commandment, it is by no means the least of them.

Do you recall in our very first lecture when we together looked at the overview of this course, I described that our journey would be a journey to go to Mount Sinai? We looked at the various aspects, and then when we came to consider the law of God, I used the analogy of a building, a building of 10 stories, but as you will discover today, the tenth story isn't actually a separate floor. It is better to consider the tenth as the internal structure and wiring of the entire building. As such, the tenth commandment is not the summit of the law, but rather, it's a spiritual heart of each commandment that God has given in the previous nine. And therefore, friends, be prepared. Analyzing the tenth commandment will prove to be the most revealing, as well as the most devastating, to our mistaken self-image in relationship to our obedience to God's commandments.

None described that discovery better than a man called Saul of Tarsus, later on the apostle Paul. For a period of time, Saul of Tarsus was the star of the class, and he thought himself to be the star of the class also. He wrote that he thought of himself as the most blameless servant among all the Pharisees, till God pressed home the tenth commandment, "Thou shalt not covet." And Saul saw that even his life that sparkled with religion was an utterly defiled sinner life, and he shared that he died to his own self-image. You can read it in Romans chapter 7. It was the tenth commandment that had made the apostle Saul first, later Paul, see the depth of his sins.

Therefore, I like to compare the tenth commandment, and in some way, all of the commandments, to the medical technology the MRI. In former days, we had x-rays which gave you a frontal view or a side view of certain

parts of your body, mostly your bones. But the MRI provides us a slice by slice picture of every part of our inward body: our brains, our heart, our veins. And not like the old x-ray, from one angle, but no, the physician can look [with] the MRI [at] every angle inside of us. And that is, in some way, what I desire to compare the tenth commandment to. It's like an MRI: how we keep all nine commandments.

We remember that each lecture I have begun with a principle before we delved into the commandment itself. This last one, I will not do that. The reason is that the tenth commandment is our tenth principle, and that's reflected in the title, *The Command to Be Perfect in Each Commandment*. So, consider together with me what does God now really forbid in the tenth, and what does God command in the tenth. What does God forbid? God does not forbid us to covet, but God forbids us to covet what is given to our neighbors.

The word *covet* has a very positive meaning. It means to earnestly desire something strongly. It is to crave or to want or to yearn for something. And though we usually think of the word *covet* in a negative context, it is also a positive word used in the Scripture as a direction, as an approved behavior. Let me give you a few examples out of the New Testament. In I Corinthians 12:31, the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write, "but covet earnestly the best gift." And what is the best gift? Charity, love, Godlike love. We are to covet that. That's not only permitted. That's commanded.

In I Corinthians 14:39, the apostle Paul has been teaching about the spiritual gifts that were given to the New Testament church, and in that connection he writes, "Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy." The best gift in all of these gifts was that we could teach people from the Word, expound the Word of God. That's what [is] meant with *prophesy*. Paul says, covet that. How much better if so much of this coveting would be found in our lives, to covet to be godly, to covet to be humble, to covet to be used in God's kingdom as a tool in His hand, to covet to have an increase of the knowledge of God in our life. Those are positive [examples of] coveting.

I Timothy 3:1 doesn't use the word *covet*, but the apostle speaks approvingly about a man who desires the office of a bishop. He yearns to be used in a leadership position. It's not disapproved. It's a good coveting. Proverbs 18:22 speaks about finding a wife [as] a good thing. Now, prior to finding a wife lies a yearning to find a wife. That is a coveting, an earnest desiring, a yearning. That's not bad. That's not sinful. So therefore, the tenth commandment doesn't forbid [coveting]. It forbids us to covet sinfully, and coveting becomes sinful when I desire to possess what belongs to another or [something] to which I have no right.

In Habakkuk 2:9, the prophet refers to one who covets with "an evil covetousness to his house." That word *evil covetousness*, that is when I so badly want to have my neighbor's house, or I desire my neighbor's spouse, or I want his children or his servants or his business or perhaps his title or his position or his status. Whatever I desire of my neighbor's in a sinful way is coveting, and coveting then means that I am consumed with the desire. I must have it. Maybe even the means I would use to obtain it would be wrong and sinful. That's coveting. And of course, we all need to be watchful that a lawful desire can often become an unlawful desire or become an evil coveting.

Children are a gift of the Lord, and it is natural for every couple to covet, earnestly desire, the gift of children in their marriage. That's legitimate, but a desire that would make me now jealous about seeing someone else having children becomes evil covetous, or it makes me to use unlawful means to generate children, or it would lead me to steal a child. Now, a lawful desire becomes an evil covetousness. Even when it makes me somehow rejoice in the loss of what my neighbor has, [that] is a coveting that is evil. Evil coveting is a silent killer and a deceitful pathway. It not only blinds us to what we have, [but] it also may lead us astray in actions that are sinful. So that's the surface of the tenth commandment, "thou shalt not covet." But there's much more, friends, to the tenth commandment than these few remarks I have made.

Let's read again, the tenth says not, "thou shalt not be covetous." It says, "thou shalt not covet." That goes much deeper. Let's again recall, and step back for moment, what is the law? What did we learn about the law of God in these lectures? The law is the reflection of our Maker, the reflection of the heart of the being of God. We were made in His likeness. We were made to reflect His likeness in how that we live and how that we love, not only in the various attributes but in being perfect, in being sinless. And that was reflected [in] how we live before God and how we live among our neighbors. That was how God made us to be.

And now God commands us in the tenth commandment, 'Be you perfect in keeping each one of the nine commandments.' God demands a total likeness with regard to each commandment to His own being. From the very roots of our existence, from the very inner being, He wants us always, at all times, in all circumstances, to

reflect His perfection: “thou shalt not covet.” The Heidelberg Catechism Question 113, and the answer, gives us this very fitting exposition on the tenth commandment. Let me read the whole exposition first. It reads, “That even the smallest inclination or thought contrary to any of God’s commandments,” notice any of the nine, “should never rise in our hearts; but at all times we hate sin with our whole heart, and delight at all times in all righteousness.” That is the heart of the tenth commandment.

I could liken it to the laws of leprosy. One tiny speck, one hair turned white, declared someone unclean totally as a leper. And so it is with the tenth commandment. In the tenth, God declares that any desire or any thought against any of His nine commandments that He has given us is forbidden. No, it shouldn’t only dwell in our hearts. It shouldn’t only live or [be] allowed to be in our hearts. No, as our catechism expounds, it should never rise in our hearts. “Thou shalt not covet,” I said, is different than “thou shalt not be covetous.” No, not even the smallest desire against any of the nine commandments should rise up in our heart.

The pinch of the tenth commandment goes [really] deep. It goes into the deepest layers of our heart in our daily existence. Let’s just think when we are tired, stressed, and strained, and in that condition we are provoked, now what does the tenth tell me? That not even is the desire to yell, or to get back, or to pay back, is to arise in my heart. The moment it rises, I break the seventh or the sixth or the eighth. That is itself already wrong, but it shouldn’t even rise in my heart. “Thou shalt not covet.” Anything. When others around me prosper, let’s take it that way, when others around me have more than they could wish, while I am struggling, when others are having joy, while I suffer setback upon setback, *thou shalt not covet* means no thought begrudging them their prosperity should even rise in my heart, or no jealousy [in] which I wish to snatch a little of theirs should rise in my heart, or no secret joy when finally loss pays them a visit should rise in my heart. “Thou shall not covet.” That should not come up.

Or, take the example of a farmer who is honoring the Sabbath Day. The sun shines. The harvest is late, or the hay is [lying] on the field, and tomorrow rain is in the forecast. “Thou shalt not covet.” What? No wish that Sunday might be over and we could harvest. That would be a transgression against the fourth. Or, no jealousy of our neighbors who got in their harvest should rise up in our hearts. Can you feel how deep this tenth commandment goes? In the tenth, God commands we keep all other nine with perfection. God commands us to **be** holy, not just to do holy. To be holy goes to the inner core of our being.

In the tenth, friends, God sets out the basis for all other nine commandments. It comes before your actions, before your words, before your thoughts. Our heart is only to be a fountain of crystal flowing into whatever we think or do or wish or imagine. And therefore, in the tenth commandment, God reaches to what we call the original sin. That murky, foul fountain of our hearts is not allowed to be there and not allowed to act, but that is our deepest need.

Now the reality of original sin is grossly denied and ignored in our society more and more. The secular world doesn’t want to hear about the sinfulness of our heart. The natural desires and tendencies of our heart are to be given space to be expressed. Man needs liberty, we hear. He needs the liberty to live out the desires of our hearts, as long of course, that we don’t harm others. But, whether it offends God or whether it contradicts God’s ordained will with regard to marriage or our sexuality or society or church, that’s not important as long as we are given the liberty to be ourselves. That’s contrary to the tenth commandment. God’s will is: thou shalt not covet anything against the pure and the perfect law of love to God and our neighbor, not in our thoughts, not in our words, not in our deeds, but no, not even in the very fountain of our own heart.

Now if you sense that this spiritual MRI of our soul deals a deathblow to your self-image, then you felt it well. Is that what the apostle wrote about in Romans 7, when he experienced that God came to him with “thou shalt not covet”? He died to his own self-image. So that’s what God forbade in the tenth commandment, but now what does God demand in the tenth commandment? That’s even harder than what He forbade. The only way we will really understand the depth of the tenth commandment, friends, is to take our starting point with God Whom we are to reflect in our life as we were created to be.

And, Jesus commands us in Matthew 5, “Be ye perfect as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” And what does that mean? What does *perfect* mean? That means that we hate all sin with our whole heart. Hate is an intense word. Hate is not only feeling; it’s also action. To be perfect means that we hate all sin with our whole heart. We all have our bosom sins, our personal sinfulness, be that pride, power, sexual lust, love of money, prestige,

control, pleasure. Now, perfect means we not only fight and resist these sins and cut them out, but we are to hate. All these sins ought never to rise in our heart. We are to reflect God. We are to be like Him. It is not in God's heart. None of these sins are in His heart. They ought not to rise in our heart.

To be perfect means we are to hate at all times all sin with our whole heart. We all have our moments when we feel like indulging our pride, or our evil lusts and our suggestions. [It is] especially those moments when we're alone or when we're in private that Satan will redouble his efforts as he did with Jesus in the wilderness. But here is the pinch of all true religion, not only to say no to Satan and his lies, but to have always a perfect heart against anything he suggests at all times, in all circumstances. Is that the end and the extent of being perfect? No, the Heidelberg Catechism has one more statement. It says that "we delight at all times with our whole heart in all righteousness."

Now, notice the word delight. God delights in righteousness. We are to delight, to take pleasure, to find enjoyment, not in just the good things of life, but in righteousness. Now what does righteousness mean? It means to be right and to do right. Righteousness, friends, means to delight to turn the other cheek and to delight in doing it. Righteousness is delight to go the extra mile and to delight to do it. That is righteousness. We are to delight ourselves in being ready to forgive those who have offended us, and then to do it with readiness and joy and delight. That's righteousness.

Can you see how deep this command goes in this last one given on Mount Sinai? God in the tenth command or directs our attention to our heart in relationship to each commandment. That's why I said it's not quite like a tenth floor. It's like the internal structure and wiring of all the nine floors. It flows through all of them. We are to exhibit, God says, in every commandment the reflection of the heart of our Creator. Who doesn't feel overwhelmed at the depth of this commandment? But can you also see why this is so vital? And why this is lying at the heart of the joy and the happiness and the beauty of our life with God and with each other? God's intention in this tenth commandment is only to make us feel overwhelmed. His intention is to make us feel convicted, cut to the core, to drive home the truth that we need a Savior.

And friends, that truth even is driven home more when we remind ourselves that the sins against all of the commandments are un-erasable from our side. Human means are inadequate to deal with sin. These sins in the depth of our being, as I brought out now here in this tenth, often escape our attention. And really, all we have done in these nine lectures, including this tenth one, of looking at the law is just the tip of the iceberg. It's just the scratching of the surface about what it is to love God with all our heart, mind, strength, and soul, and to love our neighbor as ourselves to the degree that Jesus loved. God has lifted a little bit of the ignorance about the state of our guilt. And, let's agree; it is a fearful condition that meets the eye when we begin to look in the mirror of God's law and see the reflection of ourselves.

So, let us end this lecture then on the law of God not on this note only. God's law, as we have often said, is His means to reveal sin, but not His means to remove it. It's the mirror to show how guilty and how filthy we are, and we have noticed that even in this commandment. God will use the law as a hammer to break our pride and to humble our ego, and the more we hear the voice of the law of calling us "Do," the more we should realize that God's intention by bringing that home to us is to alert us to the voice of the gospel, which proclaims "Done." And therefore, I want to close this tenth commandment by directing your attention to what John the Baptist said as he stood at the river Jordan, "Behold, the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world."

The last Adam came to give Himself for sinners, sinners who stand guilty before their righteous Judge, sinners who have sinned against a majestic and a holy God, and sinners who have nothing to appease Him Who is a consuming fire to all that is unholy. And, John directed all eyes to Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. How did He do that? He came to fulfill the law. Recall Matthew 5, "I came not to destroy the law but to fulfill it." Not only [was] the way of living and loving God and His neighbor a fulfillment of the depth and the demands of the law, but also the way of sacrificing Himself for sinners in the ultimate gift of love when He died on the cross [was a fulfillment of the law].

And therefore, may I remind you of an old preacher's saying, 'Our hope as fallen sinners lies in the doing and in the dying of the Lord Jesus Christ.' He is the door, the only door, for a transgressor to return to God. God cannot, and He will not lower His standard of the 10 Commandments. He will not be satisfied with less than perfection. And now in Jesus Christ, He has provided for us a law-obedience that honors Him to the highest degree.

Hesitate not to turn also to the Lord Jesus Christ, that great High Priest, for He is able to save to the uttermost all that come unto God through Him. And therefore, heed His urgent call.”

Having gone through these 10 Commandments, who doesn't feel heavy-hearted when we fail to do on every count what our gracious God calls us, and our holy God demands us, to do. And therefore, Jesus stands also this day before us saying, “Come unto me, all ye that labor to try to keep the law, to try to honor the law, to try to take away the guilt, and are heavy laden, come unto me, and I will give you rest.” And what is that rest? That rest is in His sacrifice as the payment of sin. That is in His rest of His obedience as the pillow of peace, and that is also the rest in His ability and power to make us walk in the way of holiness.

Thank you. May God bless these words. We have one more lecture to consider together about God's law and eternity.