

TEN

Introduction To Studies

The study for the Ten Commandments which will be published weekly from now until Easter are developed from J. John's book 10+. They are designed for small groups as a way of grappling with the material with several other people. Now you and I could do this on our own in the privacy of our own homes. Although this would be good, the experience of many generations of Christians is that actually the best way of studying the Bible is as part of a small group. Small group Bible study is especially good for encouraging the virtues of perseverance, clarity, and honesty that can be in short supply when we study the Bible on our own.

The questions in the studies following are designed to elicit thought and reflection rather than the "yes" or "no" answer. In fact, I believe that the best sort of Bible study is not simply about getting the right answers to the questions. It is actually about training people to get those answers themselves. It is to helping people to get into good habits of reading the Bible and applying it to their lives. A Bible study is not about feeding sheep. It is training sheep to feed themselves and, ultimately, to train other sheep.

Ideally we would find 2 or 3 other friends to meet for an hour and a half each week in our homes (or even over coffee at Java Java) and enjoy the experience together. Each study will have a :

- STARTER – warm-up activity
- SURGERY – problem which the commandment addresses
- STUDY – Old Testament and New Testament material
- SUMMARY – short review section
- STEPPING OUT – the "so what", possible application

Some of the studies contain more material than can be covered in an hour and a half session (like the first one). I would recommend that you review the material in advance and, on those weeks, you either agree to meet twice or use the material selectively. It would probably be counterproductive to attempt to extend the session time longer. Some people will want to do the studies before the Sunday talk and others after. I believe either method would be helpful.

My hope in this study is not that we will somehow be prepared to answer an exam at the end, but rather be drawn into contemplation and discussion of important aspects to our lives. If we catch a glimpse of how God wants to react with us and how we might assist each other, then we will have grown.

STUDY 1 - DON'T COVET

Commandment 10: 'Do not covet your neighbor's house. Do not covet your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, ox or donkey, or anything else your neighbor owns.' (Exodus 20:17)

Some people would like to drop some of the Ten Commandments because they are too hard or because their demands on us are too severe. The tenth commandment, however, is one that people often feel could be dropped because it doesn't seem worthwhile. 'Do not covet!' It doesn't seem fair to put in the same category with commandments dealing with murder and adultery. After all, who was ever hurt by coveting things? In fact, very few writers on ethics, apart from those who treat the Bible seriously, even bother mentioning coveting. Yet, as we shall see, the importance of coveting is much greater than we might think.

→ 1 STARTER

First, get everyone involved in the following exercises:

- A) How much money would it take to get you all you want? Decide on a definite figure and share it with the person next to you. Make sure they remember the amount.
- B) Imagine a modern family of four, made up of two working adults and two teenage children. Each member of the group should take, or be allocated, one of the following areas of their lives. After time to think (maybe over coffee) each person should speak very briefly (definitely no more than a minute) on things that they feel were desirable or ideal to have in the area allocated to them. While there are no real financial constraints, don't go completely over the top!

THE AREAS ARE:

- Housing
- Holidays
- Transport(cars, bikes, etc.)
- Music systems
- TV/video setups
- Computing faculties
- Kitchen equipment
- Other household equipment
- Storage and bathroom facilities
- Insurance etc

Leaders Note: Try to allocate these areas to appropriate people.

Now:

A) Imagine that a new government has decided to make the Ten Commandments legally enforceable. The group leader has been made Minister Responsible for the Tenth Commandment and needs some advice. Suggest:

- How can he/she enforce this commandment?
- What penalties should they introduce for coveting?

B) If you go shopping in the big city, what brings your expedition to an end? Is it shortage of time, money, or enthusiasm? Or is it when you can't carry anymore?

C) Now review the figure that you said earlier would get you all you want. Is it still enough? What happened?

Leaders Note: The aim of this warm-up is to point out 1) that coveting is common 2) that it is a mental activity and 3) that its influence is subtle.

→ 2 SURGERY

Discuss at least one of the following:

- 1) If aliens observed a medieval city they would probably have concluded from the size and architectural magnificence of the cathedral and the numbers of people that visited it that Christianity was the major force in the lives of the inhabitants. If they were to look at a modern city on the same basis what would they probably conclude was the focus of our beliefs?
- 2) The slogan of the age is 'I want more'. But isn't that just putting a positive spin on the despairing statement 'I can't get enough'?

→ 3 STUDY

This is divided into an Old and a New Testament part.

The Old Testament

A) This commandment is about what we desire in our hearts. The following three passages talk about different desires. Listen while three people read out Psalm 37:4, Song of Songs 7:10 and 1 Kings 8:57-58.

- What sorts of desires are talked about here?
- Are they wrong?

B) Read Exodus 20:17

- From the examples given, exactly how would you explain what this sort of desire is?
- If the commandment was being written today, what equivalent examples would you give?
- Why do you think the examples are of things like these, rather than say, coveting your neighbors looks, youth and happiness?
- Today the concept of marriage is dominated by the idea of sex and romantic love and notion of coveting your neighbors wife in the same way as their ox or house seems grotesque or even offensive. Yet sexual desire is covered in the Seventh Commandment so this is presumably directed at something else.
 - * Have we ever wished to possess someone else's wife or husband as a possession or acquisition?
 - * When a married person has the sort of thought that goes "Oh I wish my husband had his intelligence' or ' I wish my wife would dress like she does' is this breaking this commandment? Is this a real temptation? (Warning marrieds: think twice before answering yes!)
What are the inevitable effects of such thoughts on a marriage?

It is more common than we imagine for people to see a spouse at least partly in terms of acquisition. How often have you heard someone say something like 'a trophy wife' or 'she made a good catch' or 'he married well'?

Leaders Note: The Hebrew word here 'to covet' really means 'desiring to possess'.

C) Read Geniuses 3:1-6

- How does the serpent (the Devil, see Revelation 20:2) encourage Eve to covet?
- According to verse 6 what 3 elements go into Eve's coveting of the forbidden fruit?
- Is coveting the first sin? If so, what does it tell us about it's significance?

D) Read 1 Kings 21:1-19

- Why does Naboth refuse the king?
- As king, Ahab presumably was not short of land, so why doesn't he accept Naboth's refusal with good grace? What does the fact that kings covet tell us about the power of coveting?
- What effect does this refusal have on the king? What has coveting given rise to? Have you ever known similar symptoms?
- Jezebel takes matters into her own hands. What others of the Ten Commandments have been broken?

As Elijah prophesies, the ultimate results of this affair are disastrous for Ahab and Jezebel, and both they and their dynasty come to spectacularly bloody ends. After the study you may want to read what happed in 1 Kings 22:29-38 and 2 Kings 9:30-37.

Leaders Note: In the Old Testament, land was meant to stay with the family. (Leviticus 25:24-28; Numbers 36:7.

The New Testament

Jesus spoke more strongly than anyone before (or after) on the sins of the heart, and coveting and greed did not escape his attention.

A) In Mark 7 we read how Jesus was criticized because his disciples did not perform the Jewish rituals of ceremonial handwashing. Jesus replied strongly and then turned to address the whole issues of cleanliness. Mark 7:14-23.

- Where, according to Jesus, does sin **not** come from?
- Where, according to Jesus, does the root of sin lie?
- So, how significant is our thought life?

B) Read Luke 12:13-21 where Jesus is asked to intervene in an inheritance dispute.

- How in verses 14 and 15 does he specifically reply to the request?
- What does Jesus say real life does **not** consist of? What do you think he would say that it does consist of?
- What does the rich man in the parable promise himself that his wealth will give him?
- What does he overlook? What danger does this suggest is attached to covetousness?

C) Read Matthew 6:19-34

- Why, according to Jesus in verses 19-24, is concentrating on earthly treasure both foolish and dangerous?
- Why are we not to covet even those things that are our needs?
- If we covet, who are we like (vs.32)?

D) Read Matthew 19:16-22. In response Jesus lists most of the commandments, but omits the Tenth Commandment.

- How does the man respond initially? Are you impressed? (I am.)
- Why do you think Jesus doesn't ask him about whether he keeps the Tenth Commandment but gives him (in v.21) a direct order?
- What does this suggest about the influence and extent of coveting in our lives?

E) Read Mark 12:28-31.

- If we covet can we seriously say that we are keeping the first of the great Ten Commandments?
- If we covet our neighbor's possessions can we seriously say that we are keeping the second of the great Ten Commandments?
- If we covet things are we likely to feel generously inclined to our neighbor?

The rest of the New Testament develops Jesus' teaching.

F) Read Romans 7:7-9. Paul's main argument here is that the Old Testament Law made him aware of sin, a fact that was specifically brought home to him by the Tenth Commandment.

- The Jewish religion that Paul had held firmly to before his conversion concentrated on keeping God's law by behaving the right way. Why might this commandment have revealed the inadequacy of this system?

G) Read Colossians 3:5

- Paul links covetousness (or greed) with what other class of sin? Why?
- Paul says greed is idolatry. In what ways is desiring things like the worship of a god?

H) Read James 4:1-3

- What are the symptoms of the problem James describes?
- What does James think is the underlying disease?
- What is the solution? Is it that God will give us whatever we want?
- On the basis of this passage, what are the sorts of requests to God that he will reject? What are the requests he will honor?

I) Read 1 Timothy 6:6-10

- According to Paul does the real danger of coveting lie in it being a sin or in it being the doorway to sin?
- What is the alternative to coveting?

J) Read Philippians 4:11-13 and remind yourself that Paul was in chains (Philippians 1:13) as he wrote this.

- What might Paul have coveted?
- How was he able not to covet?
- What seems to have been his secret of contentment?

→ 4 SUMMARY

Think about coveting.

Coveting affects things. How does coveting affect our relationship:

- with God?
- with people who are wealthy?
- with people who are poor?

Think about contentment:

- Define contentment.
- Is to be found in
 - A. having many things
 - B. having enough things
 - C. or does it have nothing to do with things at all?
- How does coveting relate to contentment?
- How can we find contentment?

Discussion

We need to think how this commandment is applied. Try and talk through at least 2 of the samples below.

A) Do we ever fall into the trap of thinking that physical things will make us happy and that they can provide us with satisfaction, peace and joy?

B) You have seen something that you really badly want but you realize that you don't really need it. It has preoccupied your thoughts. Suddenly you find that you have a tax rebate of exactly the amount to buy it.

Do you:

- Go ahead and buy it?
- Give the money away to avoid the temptation?
- Invest the money?
- Give away at least a tenth of it?

C) Are we asking for trouble to go shopping when we don't really need anything? Aren't we asking to be tempted?

D) We are surrounded by advertisements that seek to make us want things we don't need. What should our response to these be?

E) Imagine that someone in your church just bought a very expensive car.

- Can we assume that he/she has broken this commandment?
- Can we ever determine if someone has slipped into this sin?
- But are we to say nothing in church about the sin of coveting?

So what?

At the end of this study:

- What has challenged you most?
- In what areas are you most prone to breaking his commandment?
- What do you need to change?
- What do you really want to work on?

→ 5 STEPPING OUT

Practical suggestions

- Practice the habit of recognizing thoughts of coveting.
- Try to ignore advertisements. Skim over them in the paper, don't linger on them. When you are watching TV and a commercial break occurs, turn the sound down.
- Distinguish between your wants and your needs. Then examine your needs to see whether they are things that are seriously needed.
- Practice contentment: praise God for what you have rather than be concerned about what you do not have.

Further Study

Do any of the studies you have not done so far.

1) Read Matthew 16:24-26

- According to these words, can we follow Jesus and covet?
- What does Jesus offer us in this life instead of worldly wealth?
- What does Jesus offer us in this life instead?
- Is life, according to Jesus' definition, more about giving up than gaining?

2) Read James 1:12-16

- Can we blame God for our covetous desires?
- What is the end result of coveting?

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

- For private contemplation only. What fills our minds in our spare moments is often what we worship. If a 'mental video' of your mind could be shown over the last 24 hours what might it suggest to be your God?
- For private contemplation only. Which do we look forward to most. A time of worship or fellowship, or a good day's shopping?
- Should you feel guilty if you work on producing in advertising or in making products or cloths that are designed to be attractive?
- The Buddhist answer to coveting would be to get rid of desire all together. Is this:
 - A. the right answer?
 - B. even possible?
- How do we share the good news of Jesus to someone whose life revolves around 'possessions'?