

“The Trouble With Wandering Eyes”

I Kings 21:1-20

Series: Breaking Bad Week 10. Do Not Covet

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Late one afternoon a man entered a fried chicken restaurant in Long Beach, California to buy dinner for himself and his date. After driving to their picnic site, the two sat down to enjoy their meal. When they opened the bag they found not a bucket of extra crispy but over \$800 in cash! The young woman at the restaurant accidentally gave him all the proceeds for the day. Now this man was unusual. They quickly got into their car and drove back to the store where they found a frantic store manager. The guy walked up to the counter, held out the bag of money and said, “I think you’re looking for this.” Thrilled to death, the manager said, “Wow! Thank you. You’re the most honest man I’ve ever met. Let me call the newspaper so they can put your picture on the front page.” The man modestly replied, “Oh no, you don’t have to do that!” “Don’t be so shy,” replied the owner, “I want the whole world to know what you’ve done.” “No, please don’t,” replied the hero. Then he whispered, “You see, the woman I’m with is somebody else’s wife.”¹

As we reach the end of our Breaking Bad tour through the Ten Commandments, one principle is clear – if you want a better life, you must follow all the commandments. Public honesty and private adultery do not mix. This, of course, leads to a second principle: keeping the commandments requires more than just a change of behavior – there must also be a change of heart. The tenth commandment illustrates this best.

You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. Exodus 20:17

Some parts of this commandment seem easy. For example, when was the last time you coveted your neighbor’s ox or donkey? You may think your neighbor is an ox or donkey but that’s breaking another commandment. If, however, you substitute BMW for ox, it suddenly becomes more difficult.

The first nine commandments are based on the tenth. Coveting someone’s spouse leads to adultery. Wanting another’s possessions can result in stealing or even murder. Hungering for more income or stuff can push one to work overtime and neglect God’s gift of Sabbath rest. It is even possible to covet what someone else worships – that’s idolatry. William Barclay states that “to covet is to desire something (or someone) which one has no right to have or to possess.”² Coveting involves the lust for what does not belong to us. According to Jesus it starts in the heart.

For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person. Matthew 15:19-20

Notice how Jesus mentions many of the Commandments. So while Commandments one through nine involve outer behavior, number ten focuses on an inner unclean attitude. To obey this Commandment we need to get a heart checkup.

¹ Charles Swindoll, *Growing Deep in the Christian Life*, p. 159-60.

² William Barclay, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 184-5.

This summer Lisa and I stayed at the Old Faithful Inn in Yellowstone National Park. We worshiped Sunday morning on the balcony with a view of Old Faithful Geyser in the background. Surrounding the Inn is the highest concentration of geysers in the world. Scientists tell us this is because a super volcano lies just under the surface of the park and could go off at any time (they failed to mention this fact when I made the reservation). Geysers, I learned, are caused by groundwater seeping into an underground chamber of rock made of superhot magma. When the water turns to steam, the pressure builds until it bursts. Then the process starts over. Some geysers are so predictable there is a digital board in the visitor's center announcing each geysers' next eruption. They are beautiful to behold. Yet multiple signs around geysers and hot springs warn that what comes out is superheated, highly toxic, and very harmful.

When we covet, it's like heat at the heart of a geyser. We burn for something or someone. The stronger the fire, the greater the pressure. If it is not safely released, it will come out. You might let off steam in anger, blow your stack with rage, burn with lust, or break some other commandment. Without heat in the heart of a geyser, there is no explosion. Without coveting in the heart of a human, there is no breaking of the commandments and no breaking of hearts and lives of those around you.

Yet coveting doesn't just depend on what comes out. It also needs something to come in. Just as groundwater seeps into the boiling chamber of a geyser, the person, place or thing we covet enters through our senses, usually the eyes. Wandering eyes can get us into great trouble. Consider what happens when King Ahab looks out his window at his neighbor Naboth's land.

Naboth owns a vineyard in the broad green Jezreel valley. This choice piece of real estate was handed down in the family for four centuries. While it's not a vast tract of land, the value recently rose when King Ahab built a country palace next-door. Suddenly Naboth finds himself in an elite neighborhood. When Ahab comes down from Samaria for the weekend he often surveys Naboth's grapevines with envy. One day the king approaches his neighbor with an unbeatable deal. "Naboth, I just love to putter around the garden. Helps me to unwind from stressful affairs of state. Gives me a chance to get away from Jezebel, if you know what I mean. Now here's where you come in. Your vineyard backs up to my palace. It would make a lovely vegetable garden. I can see the whole thing laid out: carrots, string beans, squash, leeks, onions all in a row. I'll swap you for a vineyard five times its size further up the valley. Grapes just bursting off the vine." Naboth makes no response. "Is it cash you want? Name your price."

It is an exceedingly generous offer. A fair deal. But Naboth isn't buying it. With an oath he swears,

The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers. I Kings 21:3

So the deal falls through. Ahab returns to his capital city sulking. The mighty king of Israel throws a temper tantrum over a tiny patch of grapevines. He storms up to his room, hides his face in the pillow and refuses to come down for supper. Finally, his wife Queen Jezebel goes upstairs and asks, "Why are you so depressed? What's eating you and keeping you from eating?" Through sobs, Ahab tells the whole story.

Because I said to Naboth the Jezreelite, 'Sell me your vineyard; or if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard in its place.' But he said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.' I Kings 21:6

“He swore an oath to God.” Ahab says. “Look at you,” Jezebel snaps, “You call yourself a king? Get up and go eat. So Naboth swore to God? Perhaps he swore at God. I will get you the vineyard of Naboth.”

Jezebel is nasty. She makes Cruella Deville look like Mother Theresa. Her approach is always decisive and deadly. She employs three tools to crush this grape grower. First, Secrecy: Unbeknownst to Ahab, she writes a letter to the leaders of Naboth's neighborhood detailing a trap she wants them to set. Then she signs Ahab's name and binds it up with his seal. Second, Conspiracy: Jezebel includes high born nobles and the low life scoundrels in her plan.

Third, and most crucial, Sanctity: She covers her deed with piety. “Proclaim a day of fasting in your town,” Jezebel instructs the leaders. A fast is often declared during a national crisis. If there is trouble, they thought, God must be angry. During a fast the leaders ask God to reveal who offended Him. Jezebel's plan shows she knows the Law. At the prayer meeting, she has Naboth seated in a prominent place, recruits two witnesses, because one is not enough, and accuses Naboth of a crime punishable by death. “Say that Naboth cursed both God and the king,” Jezebel twists Naboth's oath into an accusation. Ironically, Jezebel is the only one in this story who curses both God and king. But she cleverly covers her deadly plot with the holiness of a prayer meeting. Imagine coming to church this morning and suddenly discovering you are on trial, you are surrounded by an angry mob, and death awaits you outside that door. They carry Naboth outside the city, stone him to death and dump his lifeless body in his vineyard. The red blood of Naboth mixes with the crushed red grapes and soaks into the soil.

When the news of Naboth's death reaches Jezebel she tells Ahab to go take possession of the vineyard. Ahab does not ask about the circumstances nor does he care. He jumps up from his bed, races down to Jezreel and claims the choice vineyard. It is a perfect crime. Nobody sees who did it...except God.

The blood of Naboth cries out to the Lord. He dispatches the prophet Elijah to confront Ahab in the vineyard. “So, my enemy,” Ahab says, “You have caught me.” “Yes, I have caught you,” Elijah replies, “You could not buy Naboth so you sold yourself to do evil. You have paid a very great price for this vineyard, O king. You took his inheritance and legacy, now the Lord will take yours. Your dynasty will fall Ahab. The blood of you, your wife Jezebel, and all your house will mix with Naboth's in this very soil that you so desired.”

It is easy for us to identify with the innocent Naboth and revile the evil Jezebel. Each of us has been a victim. The cruelty of playmates at recess, the wound inflicted by an ex-lover or spouse, the child or parent who knows just how to push our buttons, the backstabbing of a boss or coworker.

Yet you and I may be less willing to admit when we trample our neighbor as Jezebel did, when we break God's commandments. Perhaps it was not murder but character assassination and gossip. Did you covet the trophy, the car, the house, the job or the salary of someone else? Did you steal someone's property, their ideas, their spouse? Did you engage in physical adultery or was it emotional or spiritual adultery? Have you ever hidden the full truth from your family, a client, the government? Have you ever let an idol take God's place in your heart? There's a little of Jezebel in each of us. We use the secrecy of closed doors, closed shades, or shady deals to cover our tracks. Nobody is watching when we're away on business, when we're alone, when your teacher, parents,

spouse or boss are not looking. Sometimes we even defend our actions with pious reasons. But God is not fooled.

Coveting only fools us. Ultimately, the trouble with wandering eyes is they convince us that having a person, place or thing will make us happy. As someone has said, “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence ... but it still has to be cut.” Coveting fools us into believing that our happiness lies out there in possessions, people, pleasures, power or popularity. G.K. Chesterton once remarked, “There are two ways to get enough: One is to accumulate more and more, the other is to desire less.” Coveting tells us that happiness is something that you must grab out there. Contentment reminds us that joy is a gift God wants to give you in here. How do you stop the steaming harmful geyser of coveting?

1. Refuse to take in people, places and things through your wandering eyes.
2. Release the pressure of coveting inside by talking about it to God and a friend.
3. Reach up to God for His gift of contentment and joy.

Most of the evil in this world derives from the delusion we can hang onto things in this life. Naboth taught us that we own nothing in this world, that nothing is permanently ours – not the land, not our lives. It all belongs to God. And He rents it to you. He purchased and saved your life with the blood of His dear Son. Everything you have is on loan. Yet here’s the strange part of this lease. The payments are made not just to the Owner but also to the neighbors. And the price the Owner requires is love. Paul writes, “There is only one continuing debt: to love one another, for whoever loves another has fulfilled the law. Every commandment of the law is summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does not harm to its neighbor” (Romans 13:8-10). Contentment begins when you realize God’s love is enough to satisfy all your desires – a love that fills you until you overflow and give it away.

That’s what we’ll discover in our upcoming series *DIFFERENT* starting September 23. Don’t conform to the coveting ways of this world. Let God transform you. Don’t be like your neighbors. Bless your neighbors. Think different. Be different. Make a difference.

Leo Tolstoy once wrote a story about a successful peasant farmer who was not satisfied with his lot. He wanted more of everything. One day he received a novel offer. For 1000 rubles, he could buy all the land he could walk around in a day. The only catch in the deal was he had to be back at his starting point by sundown. Early the next morning he started out walking at a fast pace. By midday he was very tired, but he kept going, covering more and more ground. Well into the afternoon he realized his greed had taken him far from the starting point. He quickened his pace. As the sun began to sink low in the sky, he ran, knowing if he did not make it back by sundown all this land would be lost. As the sun dipped below the horizon he came within sight of the finish line. Gasping for breath, his heart pounding, he called upon every bit of strength left in his body and staggered across the line just before the sun disappeared. He immediately collapsed, blood streaming from his mouth. In a few minutes he was dead. Afterwards, his servants dug a grave. It was not much over six feet long and three feet wide. The title of Tolstoy's story was: *How Much Land Does a Man Need?*³

What are you running after?

You can stop running. God has all you need.

³ *Bits and Pieces*, November, 1991.

