

You shall not covet

4 May 2008

Ps. 27: 1, 2

Ps. 115: 5, 6

Ps. 51: 2, 3, 4

Ps. 19: 4 - 6

Hymn 47: 7 - 9

Scripture reading: Deut.6: 1 - 25

Text: LD 44

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

God's law is spiritual (Rom.7: 14) for He, the Lawgiver Himself, is Spirit. And He wants us to worship Him in spirit and in truth (Jh.4: 24). When we turn to the tenth commandment the spiritual character of the law becomes all the more clear. This commandment, "You shall not covet..." (Ex.20: 17; Rom.7: 7; 13: 9), is the only commandment that addresses nothing but the inward actions of our heart and soul. This commandment does not speak of the outward act of adultery, neither does it speak of the outward act of theft; it speaks only of the purity of your heart.

The tenth commandment demands a new heart, a heart without any desire against any of God's commandments, a heart that delights in the law of God, a heart without any inclination to sin. It demands that we in our inmost being be conformed to the very image of God.

This high demand is at the same time the highest blessing of our salvation. This high demand, which asks nothing but perfection, is at the same time the ultimate goal of our salvation in Christ. What this law commands is the perfection of life in full and true communion with God and our neighbour.

The commandment, “You shall not covet”, does not apply only to your neighbours house and belongings, but it applies to all God’s commandments. It speaks of the desires of our heart. All our desire must be in perfect obedience to God’s law.

This commandment, “You shall not covet”, instructs us in the spiritual character of the law. God wants our heart. He is not first of all interested in all our outward duties. Yes, our outward actions are indeed important; they are fruits that become visible in our life. But God does not look at our outward actions in the same way as men do. It is easy to fool men, but impossible to fool God. He looks first of all at your heart. Your heart is the fountain of your life from which all your outward actions flow.

“Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life”- Prov.4: 23 (NIV).

That is what the tenth commandment is about. It is about our heart in relation to God and our neighbour. In fact, this commandment demands that our whole heart and soul and mind be conformed to the very image of God. As the Catechism puts it:

“That not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any of God’s commandments should ever arise in our heart. Rather, with all our heart we should always hate all sin and delight in all righteousness”.

Dear congregation, it is wonderful to see how the full meaning of this commandment becomes clear when we place it in its context, that is: the context of God’s covenant law. It is our covenant God who demands His covenant children to walk with Him in spirit and in truth.

And so the theme this afternoon will be:

The spiritual character of God’s covenant law

We will note...

1. The necessity of the commandment
2. The small beginning of our obedience
3. The blessed fulfilment of the commandments

In the first place we note...

The necessity of the commandment

Brothers and sisters, our creation in the image of God is something that is absolute unique. It is the highest privilege conceivable to be in the image of God. It implies an intimacy between God and man which does not exist between God and any other creature! We were created to live in the most intimate relationship with God. That was man's glory when God created him. He received the fullness of life in communion with God, as we confess in LD 3:

“...God created man good and in His image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify Him”.

After the Fall, God acted to reconcile us to Himself, to restore man to this intimate relationship with Himself.

This restoration, which is indeed our salvation, was further revealed in the covenant which God made with Abraham. God promised to be Abraham's God, and the God of his descendants, and He made them His people. He established a covenant with them to dwell among them as their God, and that they shall walk before His face as His people.

In making His covenant with us, God did not only desire an outward relationship with us, but a spiritual relationship in which He would reveal Himself to us in all His holy and divine attributes, in His infinite goodness and power; a relationship in which we should love and obey Him with all our heart and soul and mind. And that is the focus point of the tenth commandment. It demands nothing less than that we shall be fully restored to the image of God and live with Him in that holy and intimate relationship with Him for which we were created.

Thus the Lord said to Abraham:

“...I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless” - Gen.17: 1

And:

“As for you, you shall keep My covenant...”- Gen.17: 9.

It is spelled out further in the next chapter when He says of Abraham:

“...I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him”
- Gen.18: 19.

To keep the covenant, is to walk in the way of the LORD. And the way of the LORD is spelled out in the righteousness and justice prescribed by the LORD. And it is in this way of righteousness and justice that Abraham and his children will receive the blessings of the covenant. It is in walking before the Lord, walking in His way, walking in His righteousness, that the covenant will find its fulfilment. What the covenant demands, is at the same time the highest blessing of the covenant: true communion with the holy God. The goal of our salvation is complete restoration in His image in order that we may again live in communion with Him.

This spiritual and holy communion to which God calls us does not differ in the old and the new covenant. The communion which God desired with Abraham, was the same which He spelled out at mount Sinai, and it is still the same to today and for all eternity. The character of our communion with God is not determined by circumstance or time, but by the very nature of God Himself.

There is no principled difference between Abraham’s keeping of the covenant, and the keeping of the covenant by Israel. The covenant which the LORD made with Israel at mount Sinai was still the same covenant which He made with Abraham. The Ten Commandments are simply a summary of God’s righteousness as it relates to man’s relationships with God and with his neighbour. It is the same righteousness in which Abraham had to walk. The Ten Commandments spelled out the same way of life in communion with God.

Brothers and sisters, it is clear then that the Ten Commandments were never given as a set of outward duties. The Pharisees and the scribes, who acted as if God was only interested in their outward actions, had no understanding of God's covenant law. And since they missed the whole meaning of the law, all their interpretations of the law was twisted and distorted. Their whole religion was an abomination to the LORD and a transgression of His law. No one broke the law as much as the Pharisee, so that Christ calls the Pharisees lawless people - Mt.23: 28.

Brothers and sisters, Christ died that we may again have life in communion with God. Through Him the covenant finds its fulfilment when we are washed and sanctified for *this* purpose: that we may walk before God, walk in His way, walk in His righteousness, that we may have life in communion with Him.

And thus the tenth commandment reaches to our hearts, showing us the spiritual character of God's law. God wants to sanctify us in our deepest being, and He will be satisfied with nothing less than perfect conformity to His image.

In practice it means that we shall hate what He hates, and love what He loves. His desire has to become our desire, and our desire may not conflict in any way with His desire.

That is the purpose of God's covenant law in general, and of this commandment in particular. The intimate relationship between God and us, as expressed in the words "I will be your God and you shall be My people", forms the content and purpose of the covenant. And thus we find this same content and purpose throughout the Law of Moses.

"I will take you as My people, and I will be your God..."- Ex.6: 7

That is also the meaning of the introduction to the law:

"I am the LORD *your* God..."- Ex.20: 3.

God wants an intimate relationship with His people. And since He is the Holy One, the relationship between Him and His people is regulated by the demands of *His*

holiness. Thus the law in general, and the tenth commandment in particular, can only be understood in the context of the covenant.

“...I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy...I am the LORD who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy” - Lev.11: 44, 45.

Throughout the Law of Moses these words are repeated over and over again:

“...You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” - Lev.19: 2 (compare also Lev.20: 7, 26; 21: 8 etc.)

The holiness of God demands holiness of those who enter into this covenant relationship with Him. And this has not changed in the new covenant, as the apostle Peter reminds us:

“...as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy’” - 1 Peter 1: 15, 16 (compare also Hebr. 12: 14).

Dear congregation, we shall not covet other gods, we shall not covet a self-willed religion, we shall not covet anything that detracts from God’s glory, we shall not covet our neighbour’s death, or his wife, or his belongings. Why? Because: our covenant God, who calls us into communion with Himself, is the Holy One.

When we understand the nature of God’s covenant with us, the necessity of this commandment becomes clear. There may never arise in our heart even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any of God’s commandments. Instead, our whole heart has to be so united to God and to His righteousness that we will hate all sin and find our highest delight in doing His will as spelled out in all His righteous commandments.

Our whole heart and soul and mind has to be holy; for our covenant God, who restores us to His own image, calls us into true and spiritual fellowship with Himself.

But someone may ask why this commandment, “You shall not covet”, has been placed in the second table of the law. If it is first of all focused on our communion with God, why does the commandment itself come to us speaking about my neighbour’s house and my neighbour’s belongings?

Brothers and sisters, when we look at the second table of the law, it speaks about our relationship with our neighbour. But what we need to understand is that our relationship with our neighbour is fully and directly determined by our relationship with God.

We find this very often in Scripture that the evidence of our love for God is sought in the second table of the law. The way in which you treat your neighbour reflects your communion with God. True love for our neighbour can only flow from true communion with God. Therefore our relationship with our neighbour is described in the second table, following on the first table, not only because our relationship with God is the most important, but also because our relationship with God is the foundation and also the fountain for true fellowship with our neighbour.

It is therefore in vain to study the second table of the law, the love for our neighbour, if we separate these commandments from the first table of the law. This becomes even clearer when we deal with the tenth commandment. For your neighbour will not even know what is going on in your heart. You can be very friendly with him, while coveting something that belongs to him. Your neighbour may not even see or notice it. But as all desires contrary to the law of God flows from a heart that is unfaithful to the Lord, these invisible desires of your heart will hinder first of all your communion with God. And only in the second place may it affect your neighbour, as your desires may lead to envy, and may finally be revealed in your words and actions.

Yet, the tenth commandment does not deal with that revealing words and actions; it deals with the root of sin where God alone is able to see. And thus the tenth commandment points us back to the Lawgiver Himself, who calls us into spiritual and holy fellowship with Himself.

To come back to the necessity of this commandment: we see how the commandment “You shall not covet” is absolute necessary because of who God is, and because of His covenant with us. We see the absolute necessity of this commandment that reaches to our inmost being, demanding a pure heart with pure desires, for we are called into communion with such a God who is Spirit and who wants to be worshipped in spirit and in truth.

And only then can the love for our neighbour be pure and true, when we live before His face.

In the commandment, “You shall not covet”, we hear our God and Father calling us: “Be holy - in heart and soul and mind - for I am holy.

In the second place we note...

The small beginning of our obedience

You may find yourself on the train to Perth. Opposite you there may be sitting a young lady with clothes that are not chaste, to say the least. You look the other way, and keep looking the other way.

As you climb of the train and walk through the mall, you pass a shop with postcards. You are shocked to see some of the pictures, and so you turn around and walk away.

In another shop you see something beautiful, something that you always wanted, but you realise that it is only a luxury, and your money may be short. Shall you buy it, or be content without it? You decide to be sober, and leave the shop without buying.

After such a trip to the city the hypocrite may feel pleased with himself. He did all the right things. He resisted every temptation!

But he who knows God, and who knows the spiritual character of His law, will feel polluted.

Whenever you are exposed to all sorts of temptations, these temptations will not leave you totally unaffected. We live in a world which can rightly be called our enemy - a dangerous world. The lusts of this world war against our spirit.

But the enemy is also within. And that is why the lusts of this world, and the world itself with all its glitter, pride and covetousness, find a partner in our own sinful flesh. Even the imaginations of our heart are inclined to go against the commandments of God. Even when we reject those fleeting desires that enter our mind, the very fact that they *did* enter our mind is still a transgression of this commandment.

You may say: “But I can’t help it; it just happens!” Yes, after the Fall all wrong desires and thoughts just appear, because we have a sinful nature. All kinds of desires, contrary to the law of God, well up in us by nature - like polluted water from a poisonous well. We are sinful in our deepest being. And the tenth commandment demands that we be holy in our deepest being, in our heart and soul. The law does not allow any room for our sinful nature. The law demands of us a sinless nature! But, I am not able to change my own nature! Yes, and therefore there is no hope for us outside of Christ.

We are not only guilty because of our sinful deeds; we are also fully responsible for who we are, responsible for our own sinful nature, responsible for those fleeting thoughts and desires.

Brothers and sisters, we see how impossible it is to stand before God with our own righteousness. We see in this commandment the immeasurable heights and depths of God’s perfect righteousness. But by the grace of God this commandment does something else also. It reveals to us the perfection to which we are called, not that we may despair, but that we may rejoice in the fullness of our salvation. We were saved unto such a glory! For there will come a day when we will be such as the law demands of us. For that purpose Christ has died, and unto that perfection He will surely restore us.

There will come a day when this perfect righteousness which the law demands, will be our own, when we will be filled with it in our deepest being. When Christ returns on the clouds of heaven and will change us in a moment, then no desire contrary to God’s law will ever again enter our mind.

Brothers and sisters, now that the tenth commandment has revealed to us the spiritual character of the law, and its blinding perfection, Lord’s Day 44 puts the question to us:

“But can those converted to God keep these commandments perfectly?”

“No. In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience...”.

While we still have a sinful nature we cannot reach this perfection.

But now, some put a full stop behind this part of the answer, and they say: “See there, we are not able to reach this perfection, so why bother? We cannot jump over the moon”, they say. “We can just as well forget about it, and continue with our life”.

However, our confession here in this Lord’s Day looks quite different from such an attitude. It says:

“...Nevertheless, with earnest purpose they do begin to live not only to some but to all the commandments of God”.

Through the grace of God His salvation takes affect even now in this life. Also this commandment - that cuts so deep into our heart, judging our hidden emotions and desires - also this commandment starts to find its fulfilment in our life now and here. In the deepest of our being the seed of God’s word germinates. It starts to grow and it bears much fruit even now in this life. As Christ has said:

“...He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit...” (Jh.15: 5).

In comparison to the perfection, in comparison to the blinding glory of God’s holiness, it is but a small beginning. Yet it is a sure work of God which He is doing in and through us. He writes His law on the tables of our heart. He gave us the resurrection to a new life in Christ and through Christ He also continues to gives us the growth and the perseverance until we will finally reach the goal of perfection on the day of Christ’s return.

In this hope we press forward with all our heart and soul and mind and with all our strength towards the day of Christ's coming, that day when all God's promises will be fulfilled in glory and perfection.

We note that in the third place...

The blessed fulfilment of the commandments

Dear congregation, was it necessary to listen to such strict preaching of the law?

“If in this life no one can keep the ten commandments perfectly, why does God have them preached so strictly?”

Is it necessary to preach God's law so strictly?

Yes, answers the Catechism, it is necessary.

“First, that throughout our life we may more and more become aware of our sinful nature, and therefore seek more eagerly the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ. Second, so that, while praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, we may never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God's image, until after this life we reach the goal of perfection.”

When we look into the mirror of God's perfect law, then we see our own sin and misery. When we hear the warnings and threats of God's law, and when the blinding light of God's holiness shines on our filthiness, then we cannot but flee to Christ. Only in Him are we righteous. Only in Him are we reconciled to God.

But the Catechism mentions also another reason why the law has to be preached to us so strictly, because: without the instruction of the law, yes, without the strict instruction of the law, we will not reach the perfection as goal. Without the instruction and admonitions and threats of the law we will not be saved. God works His salvation in us, but not without the preaching of His law, and also not without the

strict preaching of His law.

Thus we also confess in the Canons of Dort:

“Just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel, so He maintains, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of His Word, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and by the use of the sacraments” - CD chapter 5, art. 14.

There you have a summary of the means of grace by which God works His work of grace in us. He maintains, continues and perfects His work of grace in us, not only by the promises of His Word, but also by means of exhortations and threats.

He who has become deaf to the warnings and threats of the law, is on a dangerous path and will not reach the goal of perfection. The perfection, unto which we are predestined, is granted us along this path only.

He who doesn't want to listen to warnings or admonitions, he who hates and despises the discipline of God's Word, or he who does not want to listen to the law of the Lord, shall not be saved.

He who does not take the warnings to heart, or prefers not to be admonished at all, has deceived himself with a false gospel.

Preaching in which the strict instruction and even the treats of God's law is left out is not the gospel of Christ.

Brothers and sisters, do you still tremble at God's Word?

Thus says the Lord:

"...on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word" - Isaiah 66: 2.

Do you still fear the LORD? Do you still allow yourself to be chastised by Him?

Is it your highest desire and delight to live with Him as He prescribes in His law?

May it not happen that anyone invents for himself another law and another God and another gospel.

Dear congregation, you have now listened to a series in which the Ten Commandments have been preached to you. And you have to know that *this* is the life that the Father has given us in Christ - a new life in communion with Him; a life in holy fellowship with Him and our neighbour.

God's law was not given to keep us in slavery, but to instruct us in the way of life. This is the life unto which we are called. This is the perfection to which God ordained us, and saved us unto.

This is good news, because there is no greater glory or higher perfection that we can desire. God is restoring us to His own image for this purpose: that He may make His dwelling with us, and in us, that we may have true fellowship with Him and our neighbour.

We can only love our neighbour in spirit and in truth, if we know our covenant God who calls us into communion with Himself. Only when we walk in the fear of His Name, before His face, will our fellowship with one another be true and pure.

Understanding this we therefore delight ourselves in the law of God, since this law instructs us in the way of life - life in its fullness.

Let us pray the Lord for His Spirit, and while we put our trust in Him, press on to the goal of perfection.

Let us with joy, but also with fear and trembling, crucify and put to death our sinful nature more and more, and flee from the desires of this world, and seek our delight in doing the will of God.

Christ will soon appear on the clouds of heaven. Then all the promises of the

covenant will reach its final and glorious fulfilment. Knowing that the fulfilment of this glorious salvation is near, we press forward in hope. For we long to be united with our Lord. We long for that day when this righteousness prescribed by the law will be our own, that blessed fulfilment of the covenant, when all our thoughts and all our desires will reflect the thoughts and desires of God, when He will be all in all.

Then our communion with God will no longer be hindered by the filthiness of our hearts. Then our fellowship with our neighbour will no longer be broken by secret covetousness.

On that day our fellowship with one another will be of one heart and one mind, united in the truth and righteousness of our God.

The command “You shall not covet”, comes from your God and Father who commands you: “Be holy, for I am holy”. He calls you into spiritual and true communion with Him. Therefore: this is My law, and this shall be your desire.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour this commandment has become all our desire.

Amen.