

“Aseret ha-Debrot: The Ten Spiritual Principles for Transformation”

Part Eleven: The Tenth Spiritual Principle ~ The Law of Gratitude

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October 18, 2020

Exodus 20:17 (NRSV): *“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”*

The key to
overcoming envy
is to stop
comparing
yourself to others



This story from the Jewish mystical tradition has been passed down over the generations. Leonard Felder paraphrases it as follows:

There was “a man named Zusya, who lived during the eighteenth century and aspired to become a great teacher. But sometimes Zusya was simply good or mediocre or, like the rest of us, capable of having a bad day when nothing seemed to go right.

There are many stories about Zusya’s struggle to become a wise teacher and to live according to the teachings he was sharing with others. But the most memorable story about Zusya is what happened when he was dying and he asked God to help him make sense of his imperfect life.

*Zusya asked God, “Please tell me, why wasn’t I more like Moses, the greatest teacher in our tradition?” God replied, ‘Zusya, that’s not the question. The question is not why weren’t you more like Moses, but why weren’t you more like Zusya. That’s what I want to know.’” (Leonard Felder, *The Ten Challenges*, pp. 208-209)*

Zusya never lived up to his own potential because, dissatisfied with how God made him to be and his lot in life, he was trying to be someone else. He coveted who another was and what another had. Are you busy trying to be someone you are not?

The 10th foundational spiritual principle or commandment, which was given by God to help us become everything God created us to be as we live together with others in community, is “you shall not covet!” You shall not covet or crave the attributes, qualities, and possessions of others. Don’t be jealous of who others are or what they have. In short, don’t compare yourself with others!

Marilynne Robinson, in her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Gilead*, tells the story of the elderly minister John Ames, who writes a memoir for his son about his life and opines about theology. He confesses the following about the Ten Commandments:

There are the Ten Commandments, of course, and I know you will have been particularly aware of the Fifth Commandment, Honor your father and your mother. I draw attention to it because Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine are enforced by the criminal and civil laws and by social custom. The Tenth Commandment is unenforceable, even by oneself, even with the best will in the world, and it is violated constantly. ... I believe the sin of covetise is that pang of resentment you may feel when even the people you love best have what you want and don’t have. From the point of view of loving your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18), there is nothing that makes a person’s fallenness more undeniable than

*covetise—you feel it right in your heart, in your bones. In that way it is instructive. I have never really succeeded in obeying that Commandment, Thou shalt not covet. I avoided the experience of disobeying by keeping to myself a good deal, as I have said. I am sure I would have labored in my vocation more effectively if I had simply accepted covetise in myself as something inevitable, as Paul seems to do, as the thorn in my side, so to speak. ‘Rejoice with those who rejoice.’ I have found that difficult too often. I was much better at weeping with those who weep.” (Marilynn Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 134)*

Is coveting a thorn in your side? Can you relate with finding it easier to weep with those who weep than to rejoice with those who rejoice (Romans 12:15)? How often do you find yourself comparing yourself with others and wishing you were more like them? Wishing you were slim like they were, had the great looks, warm and engaging personality, good health, great job, large social circle? Wishing you had their standing and status in the community? Wishing you could preach like they did or attract people to your church like they do? Do you ever covet others’ possessions? Their home? Their ability to go on vacations? Their financial security? Their freedom? Are there some among you who desperately wished to have children but could not conceive and then found it difficult to be around friends who had children? Did any of you ever get overlooked at a social function? Not get invited to a birthday party as a child? Not get asked to prom? How do you feel when your friend gets more attention or praise than you do? It hurts, doesn’t it?

How many of you have had the experience of being passed over for a promotion or award and being filled with envy? Or, even worse, gone to one of those awards ceremonies and sat with other parents or grandparents when they were bragging about their child’s or grandchild’s grades or accomplishments? How about those awful awards ceremonies when you have a smile plastered over your face as you clap for other children when your own child isn’t called forward and then have to comfort him or her afterwards? Been there, done that!

This spiritual principle or commandment addresses our desire for what others have and our lack of appreciation for or dissatisfaction with who we are. It asks us to notice what is going on internally when we compare ourselves with others. “You shall not covet” addresses this natural human tendency to become jealous and discouraged when we compare ourselves with others.

Now what is so different and challenging about this commandment is that it moves from outer speech or behavior to one’s most private internal being: our hidden thoughts, inner

drives, and emotions that we might be ashamed to reveal to others. Indeed, this spiritual principle even relates to that subconscious realm of our being that we ourselves are not even aware of, but which drives us (which is why prayer and meditation are so important because they help to purify our hearts). And we also might ask why, as the final commandment, is there a prohibition about what is transpiring in the depths of our hearts. Isn't what we actually do most important? Ultimately, I think, I would agree that what we do outwardly is way more important than what transpires within us inwardly. But this commandment reminds us that since our outward behaviors have their origin in our feelings, thoughts, motives, attitudes we must pay close attention to our inner world. And the most dangerous of these internal soul postures is actually that of coveting.

The Apostle James says that the root behind all conflicts and disputes and disorder is coveting. He describes coveting with the terms craving, envy and selfish ambition. Coveting is desiring something that has another has and being selfish in pursuing it. Coveting goes beyond normal healthy desire. It is almost a jealous craving to be someone you are not or to have something not yours as you compare yourself with another person. There can be no lasting unity in the church, family, community, or world at large unless coveting, i.e., envy and selfish ambition, is kept under control. James, the brother of Jesus and the bishop of Jerusalem, explains this as follows: ***“For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ... Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.”*** (James 1:14-15, 3:16; 4:1-3, NRSV)

The Bible is full of examples of coveting leading to destructive consequences. Some of them relate primarily to coveting property and, in this sense, stay somewhat closer to the literal reading of the commandment: ***You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*** (Exodus 20:17) Here we have a list of what people understood property to be some 3,500 years ago. The list would be different today since we travel with cars, trains, or planes rather than donkeys, use tractors rather than oxen, no longer consider wives to be property and slavery was abolished in our country with the 13th Amendment in 1865.

You shall not covet. While there is nothing wrong with wanting possessions, we have no right to the property, possessions, or persons of others. One of the most gruesome stories

in the Bible related to breaking this tenth commandment of coveting comes in Joshua 6 and 7 when God told the Israelites that when they captured the city of Jericho everything was to be destroyed with the exception of all the silver, gold and vessels of iron and bronze that were to be saved and brought to the treasury of the Lord (Joshua 6:19). Nothing was to be taken as spoil. While they successfully captured Jericho, they were not successful when they next tried to capture the city of Ai. This was because the Israelite Achan disobeyed God's order and kept some of the spoil for himself (Joshua 7:6-15). Achan admitted his guilt when he said: ***"It is true; I am the one who sinned against the LORD God of Israel. ... when I saw among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, then I coveted them and took them.*** (Joshua 7:20-21) For this he was stoned to death. Achan's coveting brought disaster to the Israelites.

Do you remember King Ahab (I Kings 21)? Beside his palace a man named Naboth had a vineyard. Ahab coveted it and said to Naboth: ***"Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money."***³ ***But Naboth said to Ahab, "The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance."***⁴ ***Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him ... He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.*** Sounds pretty childish, huh! Ahab lying there, pouting, sulking, scheming, and coveting what was not his. He was so upset that he wouldn't even eat. Maybe King Ahab would have left it at that but enter his wife Jezebel. Whenever we hear the name "Jezebel" we immediately think "here comes trouble!" She was the queen of coveting. Jezebel enables, aids and abets her husband King Ahab's coveting. She arranged to have false charges brought against Naboth, who was then stoned to death. Of course, they immediately confiscated his land. The Bible leaves us with this succinct summary: ***"There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, urged on by Jezebel his wife"*** (I Kings 21:25). This internal coveting led to Ahab and Jezebel breaking three additional commandments: giving false testimony, stealing, and murdering.

There are so many other examples in the Bible that illustrate how the secret inner coveting in the heart can lead to all kinds of evil. In a recent sermon, we looked at David's coveting of Uriah's wife Bathsheba (See 2 Samuel 11). David took Bathsheba (stole her, thus breaking the eighth commandment: you shall not steal) and got her pregnant (thus breaking the seventh: you shall not commit adultery) and then to avoid scandal arranged for her husband Uriah to be killed (thus breaking the sixth: you shall not

murder). This all began with David coveting his neighbor's wife (thus breaking the tenth: you shall not covet). Do you see how the breaking the 10th internal spiritual principle pertaining to coveting can lead to the violation of the other commandments that relate to outward behavior?

Coveting doesn't always have to do with wanting another person's property or persons. It can also relate to desiring another's qualities or relationships. King Saul coveted David's popularity among the people and tried to murder him. Miriam coveted her brother Moses' close relationship with God (Numbers 12), which led to her breaking the ninth commandment by gossiping (for which she was temporarily punished by leprosy).

Coveting is no small thing. Indeed, some people say that coveting is a root of all social evil. Coveting is sometimes called the "sin of sins," because this one sin leaves one so susceptible to committing other sins. Because of this, keeping the tenth commandment is the safeguard against temptations to break commandments five to nine: honor your father and mother, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, and you shall not give false witness against your neighbor. Coveting is not just about lusting to possess the spouse of another or wanting the property of another. It can include wanting to have the admiration and recognition and status that others have. Don't covet anything that belongs to your neighbor. The word neighbor includes all of those with whom we live in community: our relatives and friends, our colleagues at work, our church family members, our classmates and school friends. All those who cross our paths. Our neighbors.

And "neighbor" is the key word here, for do not these ten commandments all fall under the greater umbrella of the Great Commandment? In Matthew 22:36-40 someone came to Jesus and asked: ³⁶ *"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"* ³⁷ *He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."* ³⁸ *This is the greatest and first commandment.* ³⁹ *And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* ⁴⁰ *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."*

The Apostle Paul makes this connection clear between the Great Commandment and the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses when he wrote in Romans 13:9: *The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

If we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, which we cannot do if we are coveting who they are or what they have, we must take seriously and become aware of what transpires in the inner realm of our hearts. ***“Take heed, and beware of all covetousness,”*** Jesus warned (Lk 12:15). Jesus said: ***“What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.”*** (Mt. 15: 18-20). He repeatedly emphasized that our external actions are rooted within our hearts. Remember how Jesus extended the prohibition against murder to include anger and the prohibition against adultery to include lust. Anger and Lust are in the heart. Murder and adultery result if these inner emotions of the heart are not controlled.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, ***“Blessed are the pure in heart.”*** He said that the “pure in heart” will see God (Mt. 5:8). This means that the impure in heart cannot see God clearly! Think about that. Covetousness is like a dirty film over our hearts that prevents God’s light from shining through. With this tenth commandment, we are called to move from looking at outer behavior to wrestling with our own individual hearts and all that transpires within them. And this is no simple matter. We all struggle with those feelings of envy, jealousy, and greed that rise up within us. We all covet. There is a constant battle going on within our souls. I confess that for me this is a daily struggle.

How can we overcome coveting? Or at least make inroads against it. To work on this inner level of our being, we must think carefully about what goes on in our hearts when we covet or desire what another is or has. Does not coveting come from a sense of lack, from a sense of scarcity, from a sense of there not being enough to go around, from a feeling of not being good enough? So is not the flip side of this sense of scarcity and lack a heart that is filled with a sense of God’s gracious abundance and a sense of gratitude?

So what can we do? To overcome coveting we must reprogram our hearts to be filled with gratitude to the extent that there is little room left in them to brood over who others are and what they have. Let us remember that Jesus said to us ***“I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly”*** (Jn 10:10). A sense of abundance must cancel out feelings of lack and scarcity. Gratitude must take the place of coveting. We must work to retrain our minds and hearts to think not about what we lack but what we have. We need to retrain our hearts to be grateful hearts. And it is this grateful heart that will be the safeguard we need to keep us on track and live in accordance with the spiritual principles that God set out for us in the ten commandments he gave to Moses on Mt.

Sinai so many years ago, which continue to be the most important spiritual principles on which we are to base our lives.

As we come to the end of our series on “The Ten Spiritual Principles for Transformation,” I would like to leave you with one simple spiritual exercise that I learned from my mentor and teacher, Joan Borysenko. It is so easy to do that you might not believe that in itself it can have the power to reshape your heart and mind and alter your relationship to God, yourself, and to the world. You might not believe that it can be life transforming. But I believe it can be, for it will help you to fashion and form a grateful heart.

Every night before you go to bed, first repeat the words from Psalm 51:10 “*Create in me a pure heart, O God.*” As you repeat this, slowly move into a period of silence as you ask God to enter the deepest part of your being. Think of something you have never been grateful for before. Give thanks for it. For the first few weeks it is easy to come up with something new each night to be grateful for that you have never mentioned before. But it becomes more difficult over time as you have to come up with something brand new. I promise that if you are faithful to this exercise, which is easy to incorporate into your bedtime routine, you will begin to wake up each morning with a new attitude and an expectancy about life, as you begin looking for new things to be grateful for. Every day will begin to feel like Christmas, with new gifts from God and new moments of grace to be noticed and appreciated. Very soon you will begin to see the world in a new way and will wake up with an attitude of joy and expectancy, looking for new ways to experience and truly appreciate the abundance that God has for us.

This simple exercise has the power to change your life by transforming a coveting heart into a grateful heart. And a grateful heart is the pure heart Jesus referred to when, on the Sermon on the Mount, he said “blessed are those who are pure of heart, for they shall see God.”

Closing Prayer: Loving God, we give you thanks for making each and every to be exactly who we are and for the unique calling you have given us. There is no one else like us on earth and there is no one else who can do what you have created us to do. May we take seriously the forming and fashioning of our inner hearts, knowing that aligning our hearts with your heart and our wills with your will provides us with the ability to keep all of the ten spiritual principles you have given us to lead compassionate and just lives in community with others. May we be pure of heart. In Jesus’ name. Amen.