**Uncovering hidden desires**

Text: Romans 7:7

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Exodus 20:17; Psalm 19:7-14; Romans 7:7-25; Hebrews 4:12-13

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 371, 19, 119:33-40, 374, 524

**Series:** Heidelberg Catechism (LD44)

**Theme:** God’s law exposes the desires of the heart

**Proposition:** Desire Christ above all else!

**Introduction**

Exploratory surgery involves a doctor using a scalpel to cut through the outer layers of the body so that he or she can see the condition of internal organs, blood vessels or other structures. Alternatively, an instrument called an ‘endoscope’ may be used in ‘keyhole surgery’ to examine the interior of a hollow organ or cavity of the body. An endoscope generally consists of a rigid or flexible tube with a light and then end and a fibre optic cable for relaying images back to the operator. These physical medical techniques can look at the otherwise hidden state of the inner body parts, like the heart, but they are not able to see the desires within a person.

This centre of an individual’s thoughts, motives and passions is referred to in Scripture as the ‘heart’. Like the surgeon with a scalpel or endoscope, the Word of God reveals what is actually inside a person. As the writer to the Hebrews expresses it: “*The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart*” (Hebrews 4:12). In our text in Romans 7:7, the Apostle Paul writes from personal experience of the ‘heart surgery’ which he had experienced from the ‘sword’ of God’s living and active Word. ‘*If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet*.’.

Why do you think he chose to mention the tenth commandment and not one of the other nine? The tenth commandment deals exclusively with the heart’s desires. It reads:*"You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife; or his male servant or his female servant; or his ox or his donkey; or anything that belongs to your neighbour" (Exodus 20:17).*

The Hebrews word translated “covet” literally means ‘desire’. The word ‘covet’ in our text from Romans also means a strong desire or longing which may be good or evil depending on the circumstance. This word is used of the longing which Christ had to eat the last supper with his disciples: "*I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer*” (Luke 22.15). Paul writes to the Thessalonians that: “*But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavoured the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face*” (1 Thess 2:17). More often in the New Testament this word is used to refer to strong desire, which is perverted, corrupt and unrestrained.

Notice that the commandment does **not** say do not desire, but lists what is **not** to be desired. Do not desire something or somebody that ‘belongs’ to someone else. In focus in this tenth commandment is not the act (whether or not realised) of taking that which is not your own but the desire which precedes that act. The very heart of God’s Law is revealed in this last commandment. This is far more reaching than houses, women, servants, or donkeys and is expressed well in Heidelberg Catechism answer 113 – “*not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any of God’s commandments should ever arise in our heart*.”

Outward obedience and behaviour is not the essence of God’s law, but rather the inward attitude of the heart is what drives all else in life. The greatest difference between the unbeliever and the Christian is not in their behaviour, but in their heart attitude towards God’s law and therefore in their heart attitude to sin. We are going to look now at three heart conditions

1. The covetous heart which breaks the tenth commandment (and therefore the whole law).
2. The contrite heart which is convicted of sin within.
3. The contented heart which desires Christ above all else.
4. **The covetous heart**

The “covetous heart” here means a heart which desires that which is forbidden by God’s law. Recall that fall of mankind began with a heart of desire for what was prohibited: “*When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a* ***delight*** *to the eyes, and that the tree was* ***desirable*** *to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate*” (Gen 3:6). The pattern of desiring what is not yours has continued ever since the fall. For example, Achan saw the spoil of war and coveted it; David coveted Bathsheba when saw the beautiful woman bathing; Ahab coveted Naboth’s vineyard for a ready-access veggie garden; The disciples wanted to know which one might be the greatest; they coveted the highest position.

In Romans 7:7-25 The Apostle Paul writes about his own competing passions with transparent honesty. This portion of Holy Scripture expounds the conflicting desires deep within the heart of a man who knew God’s law and was painfully aware of his own sin. God’s law is good and holy, but the human flesh it operates upon is faulty. The Law is therefore unable to provide a way to obtain a righteous standing before God. Paul writes of how the Law exposes the covetous heart: *“But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead*” (Romans 7:8).

Being told you can’t do something tends to awaken the desire to do that very thing which is prohibited. Don’t eat one of those cookies in the jar; don’t be home later than 10p.m.; don’t look at that magazine, movie or website; it’s not suitable. Conversely, being told **to do** something tends to bring the desire not to do it. Tidy your room, brush your teeth, keep to the speed limit. Next time you are asked either to do something or not to do something, take a close look at the inner reaction of your heart. You and I can break the tenth commandment almost invisibly. You and I can covet without this being seen or known by any other human person. It is a truly a secret sin. A hidden desire of the heart.

However, nothing can be hidden from the sight of God who looks at the heart like a surgeon looking at the innermost parts of a body. David describes the comprehensive knowledge of God this way: “*O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar*” (Psalm 139:1-2). God, in His mercy and grace, employs His perfect law to revive the soul (Ps 19:7) by using His Word to uncover the hidden desires of the human heart. This is why ‘pointed preaching’ of the Ten Commandments is important, as the Heidelberg Catechism A115 expresses: “*so that the longer we live the more we may come to know our sinfulness and the more eagerly look to Christ*”. This leads to the contrite heart.

1. **The contrite heart**

When sin comes to light in a person’s life it is a time of sorrow. Saul would have been sorry that Samuel knew of his disobedience when King Saul had conquered the Amalekites. He disobeyed the Lord’s instructions in sparing their king taking the choicest of their flocks and herds which he had coveted. Then he was confronted by the prophet Samuel. Saul made excuses. He insisted that he had obeyed the Lord. He shifted the blame. He claimed that saving the flocks for sacrifice to the Lord was the people’s idea. It was then that Samuel uttered these words, “*Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice*” (1 Samuel 15:22). Saul admitted to the prophet, “I have sinned,” yet he asked to be honoured in the sight of his elders. He wanted to avoid public reproach, to save face. He wanted his reputation to remain intact. He confessed his sin, yet remained selfish to the end. He was far more concerned about the consequences of his sin being found out than he was about his rebellion against the Lord.

Contrast this to the time when King David was confronted by the prophet Nathan over his sin. He had committed adultery with a married woman whose naked body he had coveted, and he then arranged the death of her husband as a cover up. At the moment his crimes were revealed, David became undone. He confessed, “*I have sinned against the Lord!*” (2 Sam 12:13). He then cried out to the Lord, fasted, and lay upon the ground day and night for a week, weeping and pleading for the life of his infant son. David was not concerned about himself or his reputation. He grieved that He had sinned against God and others.

In His second letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul contrasts worldly and godly sorrow. “*Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death*” (2 Corinthians 7:10). Saul displayed a worldly grief. His heart was not contrite. He was not penitent. He lacked godly grief, whereas David’s heart was contrite. He was penitent. He had a godly grief which produced a repentance that led to salvation. He said to the Lord in Psalm 32 “*I acknowledged my sin to you and I did not cover my iniquity*”. David was a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22), Saul was not.

When the Law of God uncovers previously hidden desires in the heart, each one of us has a choice either:

1. To be sorry that what had been hidden has come to light (either just to ourselves in private or to others more publicly) OR
2. To be sorry that we have sinned against the Lord and others

Paul was a man who described himself to his ‘son in the faith’ Timothy as being the foremost or chief of sinners (1 Tim 1:15). In Romans 7 we see the contrite heart of the Apostle as he writes about what the probing Law of God had uncovered in his own heart: “*For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*” (Romans 7:22-24)

The contrite heart openly acknowledges the painful misery of personal sin and cries out to God for relief. The contrite heart understands the inward turmoil of being a new creation in Christ with the remnants of the ‘old self’ still present. Paul expresses this ongoing battle in these words: *“For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing”* (Romans 7:19).

The contrite heart desires that the Lord would continue to uncover harmful hidden desires, as David express in Psalm 139 (v23-24): “*Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!*”. How is your heart today? Do you desire contentment? This probing question brings us to our third point:

1. **The contented heart**

We saw earlier that the word ‘covet’, translated from the Hebrew in the tenth commandment in Exodus 20:17 and from the Greek in our text from Romans 7:7, literally means ‘desire’ or ‘strong desire’. The tenth commandment expresses God’s will regarding wrong desires, as explained in these words from the Heidelberg Catechism: “*That not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any one of God’s commandments should ever arise in my heart*” (LD44A113).

Human desire is a God-given aspect of who we are as creatures made in God’s image. Paul expresses a contented, heart of gratitude in the words of Romans 7:25: “*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*”. A contented heart is given over to God. It is a heart which desires Christ above all else. The contented heart covets/desires to hear God speak, like the blessed man of psalm 1: “*But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night*” (Psalm 1:2). The contented heart covets/desires obedience to God’s law: “*My soul is crushed with longing after Your ordinances at all times*” (Psalm 119:20); “*For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being*” (Rom 7:22). The contented heart covets/desires prayer; that is communication with God. This heart longs to pray, yearns to give thanks to our Heavenly Father.

The contented heart desires to be ever closer to God: “*As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; When shall I come and appear before God?*” (Psalm 42:1-2) Christ expressed His constant desire, a pure longing for His Heavenly Father, in these words. "*My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work*” (John 4:34).

To desire Christ is to desire to be like Him, to have the purity of His desire. It is to desire to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:24). It is the desire to live like the new human that you have been created to be in Him.

The Apostle Paul was on a journey towards greater Christlikeness as he wrote about uncovering the deep hidden desires of his heart in our text from Romans 7. He wrote to the Philippians about attaining to the resurrection of the dead: “*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*” (Phil 3:12-14).

Brothers and sisters press on in your struggle against sin. As the hidden desires of your heart are exposed by God’s Word and Spirit be sorry for those desires which are against His will with a godly sorrow which leads to repentance. Desire Christ and His righteousness and holiness above all else. Be content in Him. Then your heart will be glad.

AMEN.