

It was for good reason, after all, that the Ten Commandments admonished, “Neither shall you desire your neighbor’s house nor field, or male or female slave, or donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” This might just be the toughest commandment to follow, considering that by our very nature we are wired to compare.

Modern life makes this weakness even more pronounced. A few years ago, for instance, I met with one of the top executives of one of the big investment companies. Over the course of our conversation he mentioned that one of his employees had recently come to him to complain about his salary.

“How long have you been with the firm?” the executive asked the young man.

“Three years. I came straight from college,” was the answer.

“And when you joined us, how much did you expect to be making in three years?”

“I was hoping to be making about a hundred thousand.”

The executive eyed him curiously.

“And now you are making almost three hundred thousand, so how can you possibly complain?” he asked.

“Well,” the young man stammered, “it’s just that a couple of the guys at the desks next to me, they’re not any better than I am, and they are making three hundred ten.”

The executive shook his head.

An ironic aspect of this story is that in 1993, federal securities regulators forced companies, for the first time, to reveal details about the pay and perks of their top executives. The idea was that once pay was in the open, boards would be reluctant to give executives outrageous salaries and benefits. This, it was hoped, would stop the rise in executive compensation, which neither regulation, legislation, nor shareholder