

COVETING CONTENTMENT

EXODUS 20:17

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house”... even if it’s in the new subdivision with swim and tennis, and has a full basement, a three car garage, stainless steel appliances, wood floors, and a kitchen with the countertops you’ve always wanted.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife”... even when she goes out to pick up the newspaper in her negligee - and sunbathes in the driveway wearing a bikini.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s male servant”... the guy who works for the landscape service your neighbor hires, to spray for weeds, and mow his grass.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s female servant”... or the girl from *Maid Brigade* that your neighbor brings in to clean her house every other week.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s ox”... or the new John Deere riding mower your neighbor recently bought. It’s even got a cup holder next to the cushy seat.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s donkey”... even if it’s a new sport-utility donkey – and was named “*2005 Donkey of the Year*” by Motor Trend magazine.

Guys, as you look out the window at the *swimming pool* in your neighbor’s back yard - or the *Harley* in his garage - or the *furniture* being unloaded from the Rooms to Go truck - or the *bass boat* parked in his driveway... or the big screen *plasma TV* box sitting by his trash can... (*That arrived just in time for the Super Bowl*)

When you see all this, *remember what God thunders from Mount Sinai...* Let it ring in your ears... **“You shall not covet... anything that is your neighbor’s.”**

The 10th Commandment mentions specifically your neighbor’s house, wife, servants, ox, and donkey - but this list was never intended to be comprehensive.

The items in verse 17 are *suggestive* not *exhaustive*.

Yet God makes the prohibition all-inclusive with the last line, **“nor anything that is your neighbor’s.”** *And that doesn’t just include material things...* Neither should you covet someone else’s good looks, or athletic skill, or sense of humor, or way with words, or station in life, or friendships, or talents, or golf game, or intellect, or pleasant personality, or opportunities, or even their ministry or spiritual maturity.

Some of you have coveted your pastor’s ability to tell a good joke. *Shame on you!* Remember the scope of the last line, **“nor anything that is your neighbor’s.”**

Did you hear about the snooty, rich guy who ordered a brand new custom built, Rolls Royce. After a long wait his dream car arrived. He was driving through town - showing off his new wheels - when he pulled up next to a Volkswagen Beetle.

The Beetle had tinted windows so you couldn’t see inside, but the driver was anxious to communicate with the owner of the Rolls Royce. He rolled his window down, and scoffed, **“You think you’re better than everybody else in that fancy car. Hey, my beetle has a TV. I’ll bet your uppity car doesn’t even have a TV.”** The owner of the Rolls answered, **“I beg your pardon, my car does have a TV.”**

“Well, it doesn’t have a fax machine?” He pulls a fax out of the Beetle... **“Yes it does.”** **“What about a refrigerator?”** He reaches in and grabs a cold Coca Cola. **“Of course my Rolls Royce has a refrigerator.”** **“Well, my Beetle has a bed. I’ll bet your snooty car doesn’t have a bed?”** The Rolls owner just shrugged and drove off.

But the next day the rich man goes back to Rolls' dealership and makes them install a roll out bed in the backseat. He's not going to be outdone by a VW.

When the work is finished he finds the Beetle, pulls up next to it, and wants to talk to its owner. But there's no movement inside. He knocks, but still no answer.

Finally, the guy opens the door, "Oh, it's you - the rich man with the fancy car. What do you want now?" "*I just want you to know I now have a bed in my car.*"

The guy in the Beetle fires back, "You got me out of the shower to tell me that!"

Don't be like the rich man who coveted his neighbor's Volkswagen Beetle.

Guys, don't misunderstand, there's nothing wrong with us wanting nice things – *with working hard, saving your money, and purchasing amenities that will better your life.* The Bible knows nothing of asceticism – of sacrifice for sacrifice sake.

Austere living isn't necessarily a means to godliness. *Poverty doesn't equal piety.* Rather the Bible teaches us that God "**gives us richly all things to enjoy.**"

There's nothing wrong with wanting a house... as long as it's not my neighbor's house - *or his lake house.* If you're single, there's nothing wrong with desiring a wife. Proverb 18:22 tells us, "**He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD**"... just make sure the wife you find is not your neighbor's.

There's nothing wrong with desiring a new car, or a dream vacation, or a promotion and raise, or a new laptop, or new golf clubs, or a fancy cell phone.

But here's what happens... We're not even thinking about a new cell phone. We're more than happy with the old one we've got, until

we see someone else's new cell phone. It's got a color screen - and it takes photos - and its razor thin.

And rather than be happy for our friend – that she was able to purchase such a nice cell phone - we get angry because her phone is better than ours. *It's not fair.*

This is called covetousness. It's a desire born out of selfishness and pride.

James 1:14-17 provide us the anatomy of covetousness. James writes, “But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.

Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.” Rather than walk in the will of God and trust Him for our blessings we're drawn away by a desire and enticed.

We want it *now* when God says *wait*. We say ‘yes’ when God says ‘no’. We say ‘mine’ when God says ‘his’. A desire, that may not be sinful in and of itself, ends up sinful when it forces me outside God's will and ignores the welfare of others.

The tenth commandment forbids inordinate desire. It prohibits unbridled lust for possessions that don't belong to us. Covetousness is a desire out of control.

Listen to Eugene Peterson's paraphrases of the Tenth Commandment. He renders verse 17, “No *lusting* after your neighbor's house – or wife or servant or maid or ox or donkey. *Don't set your heart* on anything that is your neighbor's.”

Here are a few definitions for the word “covet”... “It's to crave, to yearn for, to hanker after something that belongs to someone else”

Here's another definition, "a consuming desire to possess in a wrong way something belonging to another."

Another author provides this definition, "Coveting is what causes a little twinge of disappointment whenever someone else gets what we want."

And I'm most challenged by Haddon Robinson's definition of covetousness. "It's craving more of what you have enough of already." It's the desire to hoard.

Covetousness is *an obsession with possession*. It's the belief – either stated or unstated - that more of anything on this earth will bring me fulfillment and peace.

In Luke 12:15 Jesus said, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses."

Covetousness is born out of a false assumption. It's the heretical belief that more of a commodity, or more wealth, or more beauty, or more of an activity, or more attention from people will bring me happiness. And when it doesn't that false belief drives me to get even more... *even if it means taking it from my neighbor*.

In a sense, covetousness is expecting too much out of this life. It's asking material things, and temporal experiences, and human relationships to produce spiritual satisfaction. *Possess nice things – enjoy your own wife's company – hire a servant to make your life easier...* just don't expect it all to fill up your emptiness.

As I've said many times before, physical stuff will never meet a spiritual need.

Here's a thought to chew on for a while, "If I get what I'm longing for and I'm still longing, then what I was longing for, was really not what I was longing for..."

Actor Brad Pitt, in an interview with Rolling Stone magazine, commented, "I know all these things are supposed to seem important to us – the car, the condo, our version of success – but if

that's the case, why is the general feeling out there reflecting more desperation and loneliness? If you ask me, I say toss all this - we gotta find something else... We are heading for a dead end, a numbing of the soul, a complete atrophy of the spiritual being. And I don't want that..."

The problem with covetousness is it really settles for less not more – it takes from others what will never satisfy, rather than turning to God for what will satisfy for all eternity. When Jesus offered a Samaritan woman a drink of well water He told her, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst." And those words apply to everything this world offers... "You will thirst again." Only Jesus can satisfy us forever.

In Luke 12 after Jesus warned them to "beware of covetousness", we're told in verse 15, "He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods.'"

It's not as if he didn't already have plenty. He was a rich man, a noble man. He had barns already. Call him *Barns and Noble*. But he demolishes his barns so he can build bigger barns. *A regular store was not enough. He wanted a superstore.*

Notice this rich man never gives God credit, or thanks to God, for the abundant harvest he's had. Jesus said, "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully." But who does he think set in motion the cycle of life? Who's ultimately responsible for the growth of his crops? *Apparently he wants to keep God out of the equation.*

God might've given him an increased crop so he could bless others rather than just himself. God might want him to *feed people* rather than *fill barns*. But the sin of covetousness ignores two things: *God's will* and *people's welfare*. An obsession with possession runs roughshod over what *God wants* and *other's need*.

Verse 19 reveals what *Barns and Nobel* was thinking, “And I will say to my soul (notice he’s talking to himself... *not a good sign*), “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.” He trusts in *goods* not *God*. He thinks stuff will satisfy his soul. His plan is to kick back and relax...

But God interrupts this conversation he’s having with himself, “God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?’ Guys, death always pulls the plug on covetousness.

Here’s the *height of foolishness*... We all know we have a date with death. Our time on earth is nothing but preparation for eternity, so why spend our whole lives hoarding and storing what we can’t take with us. Jesus draws the lesson from His story, “So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

The sin of covetousness is short-sighted thinking... it’s wanting to have it all now with no regard to what really counts – the *will of God* and the *welfare of others*. It’s the belief that if I can just get the next thing... I’ll be satisfied.

Years ago there was an episode on television that depicted a family sitting at the table eating dinner. The husband was excited. He’d dreamed up a *can’t-miss idea* that was sure to make his family rich. He would go into business for himself. He promised his wife, “Honey, one day soon we’ll be eating off golden plates.”

The wife commented, “But darling, will the food taste any better?”

We think the next thing we want is the ticket to happiness. We scrape and save, or we run up the credit cards to achieve our goal, and when we get what we want we wonder if it made any difference at all. We need to remember Proverbs 27:20, “Hell and Destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied.”

Of course, not all desire is evil. There is such a thing as *good coveting*... Often we’ll say to each other “I covet your prayers.” We

eagerly desire for our friends to pray for us. Or “I covet your friendship”. Or “I covet God’s blessing on my life.”

In 1 Corinthians 12:31 Paul is speaking of the gifts of the Holy Spirit when he tells the believers in the church at Corinth to “covet earnestly the best gifts”.

In his book on the Ten Commandments, Pat Robertson makes an interesting observation about *good coveting*, “Christians are to covet the attributes of God. The reason it is appropriate to covet after God and His righteousness is simple – God is infinite; therefore, there is enough of God for everyone.

God is never diminished, so your receipt of God’s blessings in no way takes from me, nor does my receipt of God’s nature take from you. There is nothing wrong with coveting what is in unlimited supply, any more than it is sinful to earnestly desire to breathe fresh air or bask in the rays of the sun.

The Tenth Commandment does not forbid all coveting, only coveting what is in short supply and belongs to someone else.” Evil coveting is selfish desire that cares nothing about what *God wants* or what *others need... it’s all about me.*

It reminds me of the woman and her son who were walking through the forest one day when they were caught in the path of a tornado. The woman clung to a tree with one hand and to her son with the other, but the strong winds swept the boy away. After the storm had subsided the woman wept, and cried out to God, “Father in heaven, give me back my boy and I’ll serve you the rest of my life.”

Suddenly, the boy fell out of the sky and plopped down right at her feet.

The woman picked up her son, looked him over, and then paused... With an agitated expression on her face, she looked up and shouted, “He had a hat, Lord.”

Some folks are so discontent they miss the mighty works that God has done, and the blessings He's given - because of a few details we think He shorted us.

It's been said, "The person with a covetousness heart believes everything he does for God is too much, and everything God does for him is too little."

Hey, the number one problem in America is covetousness. *It's never having enough.* It's why we're greedy, and pushy, and unhappy, and never grateful.

If you're an American you're among the top 99.4% of the richest people who have ever lived on this planet. You're in the upper 1% of 80 billion people.

Yet the prosperity we enjoy is not enough. Our whole economy is built on covetousness. We have an entire industry called advertising that specializes in creating discontent in people's hearts. It's a science. We've become experts at stirring up the desire to get more and have more. Even the toothpaste we sell promises to make your life complete, and produce a lifetime of happiness.

Covetousness is what fuels our economy. It's been said, "Americans buy what they don't need with money they don't have to impress people they don't like."

Author Mark Buchanan writes in an article published in Christianity Today magazine, "I belong to the Cult of the Next Thing. It's dangerously easy to get enlisted. It happens by default – not by choosing the cult, but by failing to resist it.

The Cult of the Next Thing is consumerism cast in religious terms. It has its own litany of sacred words: *more, you deserve it, new, faster, cleaner, brighter.*

It has its own deep-rooted liturgy: *charge it, instant credit, no down-payment, deferred payment, no interest for three months.* It has its own preachers, evangelists, prophets, and apostles: *ad-men, pitchmen, and celebrity sponsors.*

It has, of course, its own shrines, chapels, temples, meccas: *malls, superstores, club warehouses*. It has its own sacraments: *credit and debit cards*. It has its own ecstatic experience: *the spending spree*. The Cult of the Next Thing's central message proclaims, "*Crave and spend, for the Kingdom of Stuff is here.*"

Former basketball star, Scottie Pippen, made a comment during his playing days with the Portland Trailblazers that epitomizes the American obsession.

At the time Pippen was making a salary of \$14.7 million a year – not counting endorsements. He owned a 74 foot yacht, and a \$100,000 Mercedes Benz.

But at the games he would eye the billionaire owner of the Trailblazers, Paul Allen. Once, Pippen told Sports Illustrated, "*What does he have? Forty billion? How can I make just one billion? I just want one of them! What do I need to do?*"

For Scottie Pippen \$14 million is not enough. It'll take a billion to satisfy him.

Recently, I read about a survey that asked, "*How much money does it take to make a person rich?*" Respondents had an annual household income of \$50,000.

2% of the people surveyed said \$100,000. 4% said \$250,000. 7% said a \$500,000. 30% said \$1 million. 28% said \$3 million. And 28% said \$5 million.

That means 56% said it would take \$3 million or more for them to be rich. Apparently, we're no longer impressed with a million. It takes *millions* – plural.

Here's the problem for all of us - *it takes so much more to satisfy us today than it did yesterday*. Ten or twenty years ago if you made what you were making today you'd be the happiest person on the planet. I realize inflation has taken its toll, but the bigger problem is not the inflation of prices, but the inflation of our desires.

A typical grocery store in 1976 stocked 9000 items – today, 30 years later an American grocery store will carry 30,000 products. Our wants have increased.

A Greek philosopher, Epictetus, in 100 AD made a statement that applies as well now as then, “Contentment comes not from *great wealth as from few wants.*”

Here’s the problem with more stuff... *it only stuffs.* It stuffs us for a while so we don’t have to think about what really matters in life – we don’t have to answer the deep down cry of our hearts... But until we find what we’re truly longing for we’ll keep longing for something. Our covetousness won’t make us any happier.

Here’s the truth that protects us from covetousness. “There’s nothing wrong with us possessing things as long as those things don’t possess us.” You keep the Tenth Commandment by not letting *possessions* become *obsessions.*

In a recent article by Patricia Dalton, a psychologist from Nashville, she writes, “Those of us who lived through the 60s seem to have forgotten the warning that everything you buy owns you. To pay for all their junk, people now work so hard that they’re ruining their marriages, their families, and their health.”

The more stuff you have the more it costs to insure it, and protect it, and keep it looking nice, and replace it when it eventually breaks down. It’s a vicious cycle. Benjamin Franklin once wrote, “He who multiplies riches, multiplies cares.”

We think money is going to satisfy our appetites - instead it enlarges them.

A puritan pastor, Thomas Watson, once said, “As a ferryman takes in so many passengers to increase his fare, that he sinks his boat; so a covetous man takes in so much gold to increase his estate, that he drowns himself in perdition.” Coveting the next thing – living for money – strips us of what makes life really worth living.

When a reporter asked Rockefeller how much money was enough, he answered, “**One more dollar.**” Guys, money makes for a good servant, but a cruel master.

Live for money and you’ll never satisfy your boss. As Paul said to Timothy, “**the love of money is the root of all evil.**” It produces strife and frustration and despair.

James 4:2 tells us that all the clamor and friction and fighting in the world is in a sense caused by covetousness. “**You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask.**” If we coveted God’s blessing He would see to it we had what we needed.

God gives us money for two reasons... to *enjoy* and to *employ*. He wants us to better our lives, but also wants us to better the lives of the people around us.

At Mount Sinai God thundered to Israel a warning - a negative - a *shall not*... “**You shall not covet**”, but with all ten “*shall not*s” there also comes a positive...

The opposite of covetousness is **contentment**. And this should be the goal for every Christian. This should be the tenth *non-negotiable*. Let’s decide in advance to be a *contented person* rather than *covetousness person* - to seek the peace of God not a piece of the pie. To want only what God wants for me and my family.

Matthew 6:33 should be every believer’s motto, “**But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.**”

I hope we realize that our *net worth* has nothing to do with our *self worth*. Paul gives Timothy his definition of success, “**godliness with contentment is great gain.**” Success in God’s eyes is being so in love with Jesus that He alone is all I need.

Real wealth is a devotion to Jesus coupled with a deep down satisfaction.

I love Hebrews 13:5, “Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” With Jesus there’s no downside. He satisfies me spiritually, and He knows exactly what I need physically. His blessings free me - and not trap me.

Once, a poor **stonecutter** lived in a bamboo hut on the edge of the jungle. One day he heard noises in the street. It was a royal procession. He saw the **king** and his entourage. He was dressed in silk, riding in splendor – armies were at his command. He asked God if he could be a king, and God granted his request...

But as a king he watched the **sun** burn up his kingdom’s crops. The heat of the sun beat down on the parched fields, and there was nothing he could do about it. The sun was more powerful than a king. So one day he cried out, and asked God if he could be changed from a king to the sun... again God granted his request.

As the sun he enjoyed his immense power. The day and night obeyed him. Until one day **a tiny cloud** blocked his light, and shielded his rays from reaching the earth. The king who became a sun now wanted to be a cloud... God obliged.

And as a cloud he gained strength and poured rain down on the earth. He finally felt truly powerful. He filled up lakes, rivers, oceans. He affected everything, but the rocks. Massive rocks remained unmoved by his influence, so he asked to be a stone. And again God worked a miracle and transformed him into a **stone**.

That’s when one day a man with a chisel and a hammer in hand began to chip away at him. Immediately, he realized this man was more powerful than he was. So once again he turned to God, and prayed, “Please let me be a **stonecutter**.”

So God granted his request... and today that stonecutter lives in a bamboo hut on the edge of the jungle, and he makes his living with a chisel and a hammer.

And that stonecutter is the happiest person you’ve ever met.

Guys, God loves you, and He has a plan for your life. Perhaps the key to real satisfaction is not coveting what you don't have, but realizing what you do have... that *where you're at, what you have, and who you're with* is God's will for you.

I read of a thief named, Danny Simpson, who robbed a bank in Ottawa, Canada. He used a 45 caliber Colt semi-automatic pistol in the robbery. Danny made off with \$6000 - was caught shortly thereafter - and spent six years in jail.

But unbeknownst to Danny the pistol he used in the heist was an antique made by the Ross Rifle Company in 1918. It was auctioned by the police for \$100,000.

The pistol Simpson used was worth more than 16 times what he got from the robbery. If only Danny Simpson had realized he already had what he needed.

I'm praying this is the realization you reach. Paul said to Timothy, "Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God..." Let's make contentment a non-negotiable.

In Philippians 4:11 Paul tells us he had learned to be content. "Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content..."

Apparently, contentment is a learned trait. We cultivate it over time. We have to teach our minds, and discipline our thoughts to resist the cult of the next thing – to reject the belief that satisfaction can be found in the stuff of the here and now.

Paul goes on to say, "I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Paul didn't base his joy on his *lot in life*, but on the *Lord of life*. He looked to and leaned on Jesus, and expected very little from this world – good or bad.

This is the key to contentment. Bring your thirsts to Jesus. Live today in light of eternity. Enjoy the life God gives you, but seek His will, and the welfare of others.

Let me close by stating what should be obvious by now, the Tenth Commandment is a bit different from the nine that precede it. It's the first commandment that deals exclusively with attitude. At least on the surface, the other nine deal with action.

Certainly all the commandments have a spiritual application. Jesus taught this principle in the Sermon on the Mount. He said if a man looks on a woman to lust after her he commits adultery in his heart. He spoke of the man who gets angry with a brother without a cause - he's in danger of the same penalty as murder.

Behind each of the first commandments there is a spiritual application...

But the Tenth Commandment cuts right to the heart. It exposes man's spirit. With the other nine commandments we can muster an outward obedience. If you explode in anger you can still keep the gun in your holster. You might've blown it in your head, but you can stay out of bed. At least there's a superficial obedience.

Michael Horton tells of a Jewish rabbi who commented to him, "One of the greatest differences between our two religions is this idea that you've committed a sin just by desiring or thinking it. We believe you have to actually commit that physical act before it's really sin. Otherwise, we'd be sinning all the time!"

And the rabbi is right. This is why the Tenth Commandment is so vital. Here, you can't hide a guilty heart and sinful desires behind a cloak of appearance.

Hopefully, most of us can say we've never robbed a bank, but have we coveted what wasn't ours? You say you're not an adulterer, but have you coveted another man's wife? Moral people can sidestep guilt with the first nine commandments, but everyone gets busted by number Ten. Our arresting officer's badge number is 10.

Martin Luther once wrote, “This last commandment is addressed not to those whom the world considers wicked rogues, but precisely to the most upright – to people who wish to be commended as honest and virtuous because they have not offended against the preceding commandments.” Officer 10 arrests us all.

This is what happened to Paul. Before he was converted to Jesus he was a Jewish rabbi... a *Pharisee*, no less. In fact he calls himself “a *Pharisee of the Pharisees*”. Paul was a man who gave obedience to the law his total effort.

And apparently he thought he'd complied with the first nine commands.

With 1 through 9 Paul felt he was in pretty good shape. But when he read commandment number 10 he started to squirm. He had nowhere to hide.

The prohibition on coveting laid open his heart. Sin was exposed. In Romans 7:7 he confesses, “I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, “You shall not covet.”

The tenth commandment is so important because it exposes our sinful core.

The sin of covetousness fuels all other sins. Idolatry for example is ultimately caused by covetousness. Every man ends up worshipping whatever he desires. Ephesians 5:5 Paul says that the covetousness person is in reality an idolater.

Covetousness, and the desire for one more dollar, causes us to work seven days a week, and refuse to rest... Before a man steals he first covets the object... When we covet another person's property it follows that we'll lie to cover it up... David coveted Bathsheba before he committed adultery and murdered Uriah.

Let me say, even if you're innocent of the first nine commandments, with the Tenth commandment you have no alibi –

your fingerprints and DNA are all over this one. You can't escape the evidence. "You shall not covet..." You're busted.

And if you break one of the commandments the Bible says it's the same as breaking all ten. God doesn't grade on a curve. He accepts nothing less than a perfect score. And this is why no one ever was or will be saved by the Law.

This is why we all desperately need Jesus. He alone can wash away our sin. He alone can change a covetousness heart. If you ask Him, Jesus will quench your thirst, and give you peace. Jesus is the author of true contentment.

I hope Jesus is the number one non-negotiable in your life...