

God's Answer to Your Greatest Struggles  
**Our Struggle for Contentment**

*"Do not covet..."*  
Exodus 20:17

Drama: "Not that I'm Jealous"

## COVETOUSNESS

"Not that I'm envious, or jealous, or greedy, or covetous"...for that would break the tenth commandment! And just what does the tenth and final commandment say?

Do not covet your neighbor's house.  
Do not covet your neighbor's wife, male or female servant,  
ox or donkey, or anything else your neighbor owns. NLT

We are not to covet our neighbor's *house*, his *property*. We are not to covet our neighbor's *wife*, or his *male or female servant*, the *people* that belong to him. Nor are we to covet his *ox or donkey*. Now I don't know about your neighbors, but my neighbors don't have an ox or donkey. But they might have a boat, or a car, or a Jacuzzi that I could covet. These are their *possessions*.

And then, just in case what you covet is not in one of those categories – property, people or possessions – God adds, "or anything else your neighbor owns." Think about it. That could be your neighbor's particular set of circumstances. We can very easily fall into what I call the "Asaph syndrome." What's that? Remember Asaph's complaint in Psalm 73? Here's what he says as he covets what he perceives to be the easy circumstances of those around him:

Truly God is good to Israel,  
to those whose hearts are pure.  
But as for me, I came so close to the edge of the cliff!  
My feet were slipping, and I was almost gone.  
For I envied the proud  
when I saw them prosper despite their wickedness.  
They seem to live such a painless life;  
their bodies are so healthy and strong...

These fat cats have everything  
their hearts could ever wish for!

Was it for nothing that I kept my heart pure  
and kept myself from doing wrong?  
All I get is trouble all day long;  
every morning brings me pain. NLT

Do you ever feel like Asaph? And just what is it that – like Asaph – you covet today? Property? People? Possessions? Or maybe a particular set of circumstances?

As we explore together this tenth and final commandment, let me ask you: How does this commandment differ from the other nine? (Answers from congregation)

Right, while the first nine deal with *actions*, this last commandment goes deeper to the issue of *attitudes*. This final commandment doesn't only call us to refrain from *doing* something, but to refrain from *being* something. The first nine commandments deal more or less with the outer symptoms of sin. This last commandment addresses the inner sickness of sin. My neighbor would certainly know it if I stole his car or new fishing boat. But he may never know that I *covet* those things. (Maybe here a slide that shows the contrast)

Before going any further, we need to ask a basic question: Just what is covetousness? How would you define what it means to covet? (Answers from congregation: will certainly include the idea of *desire*).

Maybe here the restatement of the last commandment as found in Deuteronomy 5 can help us. Notice how this last commandment is worded there in the New International Version: "You shall not set your *desire* on your neighbor's house or land, his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (Deuteronomy 5:21 NIV).

Is all desire wrong? Certainly not. When I'm hungry, the desire for food is not wrong. When I'm thirsty, the desire for water is not wrong. As a married man, the desire for my wife is not wrong.

What then distinguishes the sin of covetousness from these otherwise good desires? Here's the difference. Covetousness is misdirected desire. Covetousness is desire gone askew. Covetousness is perverted desire that takes us outside the moral perimeters that God has lovingly established in our best interest.

When hungry, the very desire for food, though not sinful in itself, can become gluttony if misdirected. The normal sexual desires that God has built into us are not sinful in and of themselves. But when misdirected, they are not only sinful but carry with them the most complicated of consequences.

Jesus once said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone *who looks at a woman lustfully* (that is covetousness) has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:27-28). Covetousness is misdirected desire.

Question: Why is this commandment included here in the Big Ten? Answer: To help us understand that the heart of the problem *is* a problem of the heart. Some think that the Old Testament only talks about outward things (actions), and that you have to wait until you get to the New Testament before heart issues (attitudes) are dealt with. But that's not true. This tenth commandment is saying exactly what Jesus says:

It is what comes from inside that defiles you. For from within, *out of a person's heart*, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft murder, adultery, *greed*, wickedness, deceit,

lustful desires, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you. Matthew 7:20-23 NLT

And now we begin to see the gravity of our problem. The Ten Commandments are not simply talking about behavioral change. Anyone can experience that to a certain degree. You have a problem with lying, adultery, stealing, or pornography. Or maybe you're struggling with alcohol abuse, drugs or the garbage that comes out of your mouth. With a little therapy, accountability and effort, you can see a certain degree of progress. And from all outward appearances, it might look like you're getting your act together.

*But only Jesus can radically transform a person's heart.* You can't do it. I can't do it. Only God can.

Maybe that's why Paul refers to this last commandment in Romans 7. Here's what he says:

It was the law that **showed** me my sin. I would never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, "You must not covet." ... But when I learned the command not to covet, for instance, the power of sin came to life and I died. Romans 7:7-10a NLT

Notice how Paul begins in verse 7: "*It was the law that **showed** me my sin.*" The law is like a mirror revealing to us just how dirty you and I really are. When you and I get up in the morning and look in the mirror, we might see that we need to wash our face, shave our face, or comb or brush our hair. But when was the last time you took that mirror off the wall and tried to wash or shave your face with it, or comb your hair with it. That wouldn't work too well! Paul is saying that the law is like that. It can show us just how dirty we are, but it can't take the dirt away. You need a washcloth to do that.

So the purpose of the Ten Commandments is to *show* us our sin, but not to *save* us from our sin. Remember, none of us have kept or can keep the Ten Commandments. It's like jumping up and trying to touch the ceiling of this auditorium. How many of you can do that? None of us can. Just like this ceiling is too high for us to touch, the standard of the law is too high for us to keep.

That reminds me of the story of one man who was so impressed by a series of messages on the Ten Commandments, that he said as he left church, "Pastor, I'm so impressed by your messages that I've made up my mind that I'm goin' to keep one of them commandments each week until I get through all ten of them."<sup>i</sup> Of course, from God's perspective, it's not keeping one a week, but keeping all of them all of the time, including the last one "You shall not covet."<sup>ii</sup> And who can do that? Not one of us.

So what is the solution? Paul answers that question later on in chapter 7. Notice in verse 24 he concludes:

Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?

Maybe you feel that way. Maybe you feel pretty miserable, struggling with your old worn out efforts to make life work. Frustrated by your human efforts to reform your old life and live up to

God's standard. Paul too felt that way. He came to the point of recognizing that, by his own self-effort, he could never pull it off.

So what's the solution? It's found in verse 25: "Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord." Use your imagination with me. Suppose that you were given a pen and paper, ten minutes and this assignment: Describe the character of Jesus Christ in ten brief sentences. What would you write? The simplest and best answer would be to write the Ten Commandments. The "Perfect Ten" flow from the very character of God and perfectly describe the person of Jesus Christ.

You see, Jesus has done what you and I could never do. He kept the law, the Big Ten, perfectly. Never lied. Never stole. Never coveted. He loved God the Father with all of his heart, soul and mind and loved his neighbor as himself. And as the only person in all of history who ever kept the all the law all the time, he then died for you and me. "He who knew no sin," the Bible says, "became sin for us, [why?]. . . that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Remember, the purpose of the law is to *show* us our sin, not *save* us from our sin. The only way that you and I can become "righteous" before God is *not* by striving in our own effort to keep the Ten Commandments, but by believing in the One – the only One – who kept them perfectly. When we do that, his righteousness becomes our righteousness.

If you haven't already, will you do that this morning? Will you give up your own efforts at trying to make life work, and your own efforts to somehow merit eternal life...and let Jesus be the forgiver of your sin, the healer of your heart and the leader of your life?

## CONTENTMENT

Something else happens when we embrace Jesus and become a Christ-follower. Gradually, our covetousness is replaced by *contentment*. Remember, covetousness is *misdirected desire*. But what then is contentment? How would you define it? (Answers from congregation).

Contentment is *fulfilled desire*. The Bible has a lot to say about the opposite of covetousness, which is contentment. Turn with me, for example, to Philippians 4:11-13:

I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. *For I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me.* Philippians 4:11-13 NLT

I see three things in this verse that tell me how to experience contentment. First, *contentment can be learned*. Paul says it twice: "I have *learned* how to be content..." and again, "I have *learned* the secret of living in every situation..."

We don't just suddenly wake up one morning and "Presto!" ... we discover that we no longer covet what others have, and are absolutely content with our own situation in life. No, contentment is learned. Paul *learned* it. And we *learn* it.

How is it learned? Contentment is learned through the circumstances – and oftentimes difficult circumstances – of life. Notice again what Paul says. “I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything...with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little.” Remember, where is Paul when he writes this letter to the Philippian believers? That’s right, he’s in prison in Rome.

Some of you are in your own “prison:” The prison of painful circumstances [and these are sometimes the result of our own sinful choices], the prison of financial pressure, the prison of grief following the loss of a loved one. But whatever that prison is, you as Paul can learn to be content. In fact, it is often those very difficult circumstances that God is using in order to train you in the art of contentment.

But just how can we know such contentment in our lives? The answer is found in verse 13. Contentment is found only in Jesus Christ: “For I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me.” Remember what we said earlier? What is contentment? It is fulfilled desire. While covetousness is misdirected desire, contentment is fulfilled desire. Our deepest desires can only be ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

We can picture it this way. Daily we are faced with the choice between going down the road of *covetousness* (i.e. misdirected desire), or choosing the road of *contentment* (i.e. fulfilled desire). The road called “covetousness” ultimately leads to death. James reminds us: “...we are tempted when, by our own *evil desires*, we are dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (James 1:14-15). Drawing of an intersection where there is the choice between two directions

On the other hand, we can choose the road to contentment. Jesus said, “Come unto me, all of you who are weary and burdened down, and I will give you rest.” Rest...that is contentment. Rest...that is fulfilled desire. We rest from our own striving. We rest from our own strategies to make life work. We rest from our own attempts to satisfy the deep, inner desires that God has instilled in our hearts.<sup>iii</sup>

This morning, a table is set before us. Are you hungry? Are you thirsty? It is here, in what these elements represent, that contentment can be found.

There is the bread, speaking of the broken body of Jesus Christ. There is the juice, speaking of his shed blood for you and me. Here we can find true contentment. Here we have a treasure beyond words.

Jesus once told the story of a man who discovered a treasure hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid the treasure again in the ground, went and sold everything that he owned to get enough money to buy the field...and to get the treasure too! (Matthew 13:44).

What Jesus is saying is this: I *am* the treasure. When you find me, you find true wealth, life, meaning, significance, hope, satisfaction, peace, joy. When you find me, you find a treasure of infinite worth. In finding me, you find all your heart longs for and all you could ever hope for. In comparison to all I am and all I offer you, the cheap substitutes of this world pale into

insignificance. You can never find *apart* from me what you can only find *in* me. I am life. I am forgiveness. I am peace. I am joy.

From the moment of discovery, this man's life is radically changed. Everything in his life is suddenly focused on the possession of this inestimable treasure. This man understood the immense value of the treasure and the high priority of possessing it. He is willing to give up everything that prevents him from possessing it. What was originally thought to be of some value (all he owned) is now considered worthless in comparison to the value of what he has just found. It seems that selling all he has is not really a sacrifice, it is smart! It is a joy! No sacrifice is too great to make for such a treasure!

Is this man on the road called "covetousness?" No, he's on the road called "contentment." As you come to take these elements this morning, ask yourself which road you are on. They lead in very different directions. One to death. The other to life.

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<sup>i</sup> Robert J. Morgan, 732.

<sup>ii</sup> It's interesting that Paul refers to coveting, the last of the Ten Commandments. There are probably two reasons for this. As the last of the Ten Commandments, this one serves as a summary of all ten. But even more than that, the commandment about coveting is different from the other nine in that it focuses upon an inner attitude rather than an outward action. Covetousness is the well-spring from which flow the breaking of the other nine commandments. This sin of covetousness is also well hidden and not seen by others. But God sees it and surgically exposes it by His righteous law.

<sup>iii</sup> Our problem is that all too often we begin to think that our desires can find fulfillment elsewhere. And that's when we begin to go down the road called covetousness. Our desires are good and God given, as long as they push us toward God. As I've often said in the past, repeating the words of C.S. Lewis, our real problem with temptation and sin is not that our desires are too strong, but that they are not strong enough. We are far too willing to settle for the temporary exhilaration of misdirected desires – coveting that which we don't have – rather than the lasting joy of fulfilled desires – fully appreciating that which God has already given us in Jesus Christ.