

The Virtue of Contentment

10th of the Ten Commandments

The last of the Ten Commandments says, “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house; thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor’s” (Exodus 20:17). The word “covet” is about the same as our word “greed.” The Commandment could very well be translated to say, “Thou shalt not be consumed by greed.” Covetousness is a sin which we can easily hide from other people.

The opposite of anxiety and greed and covetousness is contentment. That is why we chose the title, “The Virtue of Contentment.” If one is really content with what he has, he will not quickly be craving more and more. Paul wrote to the Philippians (while he was locked in prison), and said, “I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content” (Philippians 4:11). Paul had **to learn** contentment. He was reared in luxury. He never knew what it was to be in want. But later, as a servant of Christ, he began to sometimes be in want, and had to learn to be content. He learned that our real sufficiency is in Christ. By faith, Paul had come to accept the great truth expressed in Psalm 17, where the Psalmist says that his contentment is not in wealth, but in seeing God and in knowing that all is well between him and God.

The instruction in Hebrews 13:5 is very clear: “Let your conversation be without covetousness, and be content with such things as ye have; for he hath said, I will never leave thee nor forsake thee.” You probably heard about the pious landowner who put up a sign on a vacant lot next to his house. The sign said, “This lot will be given free of charge to anyone who is really satisfied.” A wealthy farmer happened to ride by and noticed the sign. Immediately he stopped by and requested the lot. He had felt that since the landowner was going **to give** the ground away, he might as well have it as anyone else. He thought to himself, “I’m rich; I have all I need; surely I qualify.” He explained to the landowner that he was completely satisfied, and thus he would like to claim the property. The owner of the lot said to the wealthy farmer, “Are you really satisfied?” The farmer replied, “I surely am; I have all I need; I am well satisfied.” The pious old gentleman who had offered to give away the lot looked the farmer in the eye and said, “Friend, if you are so well satisfied, what do you want with my lot?” That question revealed the covetousness of the man’s heart.

1. The Meaning of Covetousness

Just exactly what is covetousness? It is sometimes defined as “the desire to have what someone else has.” But you see, we can covet what we notice in a store or what we see in a Sears catalog, and so it is not merely desiring what someone else has. Covetousness is simply the desire for more. It is about the same as greed. It is the subtle determination that we need more than we really do. Covetousness is a sin which kills contentment.

One of the root words translated “covet” means “to boil.” It denotes a fervent and passionate desire; it signifies an excessive appetite for wealth and earthly possessions; it is a feeling of always

wanting more. One who is given to covetousness is not satisfied with his present situation and has a basic drive to accumulate more. The covetous person assumes that all he earns can be spent any way he wants to spend it. When he gets a paycheck he says, “What do I want? What do others have? What’s new? What would make life easier for me?” The basic motivation behind all sinful covetousness is deep-rooted selfishness.

Every human being is to some extent tainted with the sin of greed. Jeremiah says, “For from the least of them even to the greatest of them, everyone is given to covetousness” (Jeremiah 6:13). Many years ago, near Springfield, Illinois, one of the villagers heard a noise in front of his house. He went to the door to look, and saw Abraham Lincoln walking by with his two sons—both crying loudly. The neighbor said to Abe: “What is the matter?” Mr. Lincoln said, “Their trouble is just what is the matter with the whole world; I have three walnuts, and each boy wants two.”

Our nation has become a nation of coveters. Every state capitol has lobbyists and pressure groups, each wanting the wealth of others, and each group is striving to see how much they can get for themselves and for their group.

Our churches have become congregations filled with covetous people. The fad in most churches is to move in a direction based upon the covetous desire to be like the other churches—formalities, liturgies, banquets, Halloween parties, talent shows, youth hay rides, Christmas celebrations—and a host of activities totally unrelated to the true mission of the church. Much money is spent on useless vanities; the money could be used to effectively help those in great need and to support evangelistic ministries that are starving for funds to carry on their important work.

And then of course, each individual has tendencies toward covetousness. A teenager evaluates a friend and says, “I’d give anything to have what he has—money, brains, friends, clothes, personality, etc.” A poor man envies a rich man for his money. A rich man envies a poor man for his health. A factory worker envies a doctor for the kind of life he lives. A doctor envies a factory worker because he can start at 7:30 and quit at 4:30. It always seems like the other person is better off than we are. The grass on the other side of the fence always looks greener, but usually it is not greener. Covetousness then is a word that means “an excessive desire to have more.” It implies a dissatisfaction with one’s lot in life.

2. The Forms of Covetousness

The word “covet” is really a neutral word which sometimes is used in a good sense. We are told, for example, to “covet earnestly the best gifts” (1 Corinthians 12:31). There is nothing inherently wrong with desiring things, but if one desires things out of a selfish ambition, then he is breaking the Tenth Commandment. We **should** covet a good name, a sweet spirit, and a Christlike character. It all depends on the object coveted, the goal in view, and the spirit which permeates the desire. It is the wrong kind of coveting which is prohibited in the Exodus 20 passage.

a) The undue desire for money and material things. All of us must guard against the snare of materialism. We must use moderation with respect to worldly goods. Jesus spoke of this form of covetousness when He said, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of things which he possesseth” (Luke 12:15). Satisfaction with what we have

(contentment) does not come from having all our wants supplied, but rather, it comes from reducing our desires to include only the essentials of life. 1 Timothy 6:8 says, “And having food and raiment, let us therewith be content.” The original word translated “raiment” means “coverings”—and refers **both** to clothing and to shelter. Thus, if we have enough to eat, and proper clothing, and a roof over our heads—if we have food and clothing and shelter, we should be satisfied.

It is part of our inborn human nature to want more. From the time we could crawl on our knees, we wanted a little red wagon, and then a tricycle with a bell, and then a bicycle and a car and a house and dozens of other things. Today—it’s snowmobiles and minibikes and calculators and digital watches and microwave ovens and video games and coconut-creme pie to top off the overstuffed feeling! Jesus speaks much about material things. He says we should not “lay up for ourselves treasures upon earth”—and yet for many of us, those words might just as well not be in the Bible!

Many today have become obsessed with the desire to gorge themselves with trivial, unnecessary things—and many of those things soon become more junk to sell at the next garage sale. Material things can really get a tight grip on us. It is easy to think that we must have expensive furniture, sleek automobiles, restored antiques, extravagant holidays, up-to-date hunting equipment, etc. It is a sad thing to see a man work himself nearly to death, seeking to accumulate material things, and then die and let them all behind. Jack Benny used to say, “If I can’t take it with me, I won’t go.” But a few years ago, Jack Benny (the comedian) went, like all the rest of us are going to go.

It is natural and lawful for all of us to have a moderate desire for earthly goods. A desire for creature comforts, and for material sufficiency, is not wrong. It is the inordinate desire that is sinful. The Apostle Paul balances the whole matter of our attitudes toward material things, in Timothy 6:17, when he says, “God has given us all things to enjoy.” The Lord is not saying that we should become ascetics, and live in mud houses, and rigorously deny ourselves of every good thing—but He does expect us to be careful about the abuse of money, and He does expect us to avoid thinking we must have more and more of this world’s material possessions. All of us need to strive for a happy medium—trying to be thrifty without being miserly.

The writer in Proverbs 30 states the balanced view toward material things when he eloquently says, “Give me neither poverty nor riches, lest I be poor and steal . . . (or) lest I be full and deny thee” (Proverbs 30:8-9). If one is poor, there will be a temptation to steal; if one is rich, there will be a tendency to think he can get along without God. It is best just to have the simple necessities of life—no more and no less. This seems to be “the golden mean” that will help each of us avoid the dangers of prosperity, as well as the desperations of poverty. Certainly it cannot be right for us to spend huge sums of money for closets full of clothes when many people scarcely have enough to wear, and it cannot be proper for us to buy now and pay later (paying high interest rates), when really we could get along without the new gadgets. This is the first form of covetousness.

b) An excessive appetite for status and position. The scribes and Pharisees desired the chief places in the synagogue. James and John coveted the chief places in the coming kingdom (Mark 10:35-45). This kind of covetousness brings on the corrosive sins of envy and jealousy. Sometimes one person would like to have the more prominent place held by another. He wants greatness for himself and is

jealous of another who happens to be a more successful rival. One can covet another's success, and personality, and abilities—and thus break the Tenth Commandment.

To covet another's position can be just as dangerous today as it was three thousand years ago when God gave these Commandments to Israel, and said, "Thou shalt not covet." We must learn to say, "God made me as I am and He put me where I am, and He has something for me to do by using just what He has given me to use." Our job is not to envy someone else's life, but to make the very best of our own.

c) An unlawful desire for other persons. Covetousness is not limited to money and position. The Tenth Commandment says, "Thou shalt not covet . . . anything." We have no right to the **possessions** of others, nor to **the person** who belongs to someone else.

King David one time coveted the beautiful wife of one of his soldiers. His covetousness led him to take her and then place her husband on the front line of battle so that he would meet his death (2 Samuel 11). And just so today, there are thousands of men who let improper desires go out after the wives of other men. They invade the sanctity of marriage. They drag other households into misery and disgrace. And of course, the woman who flirts with (and becomes unduly familiar with) a man other than her husband, has a wicked heart. The man who flirts with (and becomes unduly familiar with) a woman other than his wife, is a stench before God. It is hard to think of a crime that is more unspeakable and more soul-damning and more far-reaching in its effects, than that of the man who steals the affections of another man's wife and wrecks another man's home—just to satisfy his own lustful desires.

In Colossians 3:5, God includes the sin of coveting right along with a list of sins of sexual impurity. The man who commits fornication with an unmarried girl is a covetous person. He calls it "love"—but really it is greed—a covetous desire to satisfy his own physical appetite. Every girl and young woman needs to be aware that if a man truly loves a woman he will not ask for her body first. Rather, he will want to make the commitment of honorable marriage, and promise to provide for her and to be a companion by her side day after day. And then after the binding commitment of marriage is consummated, you can share with him the secrets of your body and soul.

3. The Cure for Covetousness

Covetousness is the root of many other forms of evil. In the case of Achan, it led to theft; in the case of Ahab, it led to murder; in the case of David, it led to adultery. But there are factors which can help us conquer the dangerous sin of covetousness.

a) Covetousness can be cured by putting simple trust in the Heavenly Father. Jesus believed in thrift and hard work, but He warned against becoming anxious about such necessities as food and clothing. Jesus said in Matthew 6 that we should not be like the heathen, and that we must not worry about having enough food and clothing, because our Heavenly Father knows we have need of these things, and He will give them to us—if we give Him the first place in our lives (Matthew 6:31-33). Covetousness is essentially a distrust in God's providence. It implies that we are not certain that God will take care of us and supply our needs—and therefore we feel we must grasp and grab and seek constantly to get more.

b) Covetousness can be cured by cultivating a satisfied and contented spirit. The word “content” means “satisfied; happy with what one has; showing no desire for something more.” A wealthy man driving an expensive car, pitied a farmer friend who lived without all the luxuries he was enjoying. As he was driving by one day, he saw the farmer dressed in overalls and a straw hat, sitting on a fence by the side of the road. The wealthy man stopped to chat with the farmer, and said to him: “I couldn’t stand to live here; you don’t see anything, and I suppose you don’t get a chance to travel much either; I’m on the go all the time.” The man on the fence looked down into the face of the wealthy man sitting in his car, and said: “I don’t see the difference between you and me—in what we are doing. I sit on the fence and see the cars go by; you sit in your car and see the fences go by! Only I’m much safer than you are, and it is much cheaper too.”

Contentment is a virtue every one of us needs to cultivate. We need to preach a little sermon to ourselves and remind our own hearts that every person comes into this world without a penny in his pocket (in fact, without a pocket to put a penny in), and we leave this world without taking any material goods with us. Having therefore food and raiment, let us therewith be content.

c) Covetousness can be cured by being conscious of stewardship responsibilities. The Bible does not condemn wealth if it is acquired honestly and distributed wisely. I rejoice to occasionally meet a Christian who has riches, and at the same time, he lives modestly and distributes generously to the Lord’s work. The great Christian antidote for the poison of greed is the grace of giving. Jesus designed the whole principle of stewardship to help us conquer the sins of covetousness and greed. Jesus said, as recorded in Acts 20:35, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” God knows the dangers of wealth and the deceitfulness of riches—and that these things choke out the Word—and so He teaches us to be generous in our sharing with others.

When John D. Rockefeller was a young man, he was a strong and husky farm boy. He later entered business and drove himself like a slave. At the early age of 33, he had made his first million dollars. By concentrating every waking moment on his work, by the age of 43, he controlled the largest business in the world. When he was 53, he was the richest man on earth, and the world’s only billionaire. But in exchange for all his wealth, he had lost his own happiness and health. He lost his hair. One writer says that he looked like an Egyptian mummy. His weekly income was a million dollars, but his digestion was so bad that at one point he could eat only crackers and milk. It was generally agreed that he could not live another year. Newspaper writers actually had his obituary written and lying in their files.

It was during the long nights when John D. Rockefeller could not sleep, that he began to do some serious thinking. He began to acknowledge that he couldn’t take one penny with him into the next world. He made a commitment that he would transform his money into a channel of blessing for others. He began to help worthy causes: He established the Rockefeller Foundation, and contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to hospitals and missions and medical research. It was his contribution that helped rid the southern part of the U.S.A. from the scourge known as hookworm. It was he who financed the research that led to the discovery of penicillin, and the cures of malaria and tuberculosis and diphtheria. But not only did Rockefeller’s giving help thousands of others; it worked a miracle in his own life. He began to sleep and eat normally, and to enjoy life in

general. When Rockefeller was 53, it appeared that he would never celebrate another birthday. But he started to practice one of God's eternal laws (the law of giving) and he reaped its benefits. Luke 6:38 says, "Give, and it shall be given unto you, good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over." John D. Rockefeller lived not only until his 54th birthday, but he experienced good measure, running over. He lived until he was 98 years old. This is one example which illustrates the great truth that enjoyable living is not obtained by grabbing and grasping, but by giving to others.

The Ten Commandments are like a mirror. We hold them up before our faces and see ourselves as sinners. I can't speak for you, but as I examine my own life, I realize once again how much I need a Savior. The Ten Commandments were not intended to bestow righteousness; they were not intended to make us acceptable before God; they were designed to show us how sinful we are and to become a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ. If you have never cried out to God for mercy and forgiveness, and received the salvation which He offers through Jesus Christ, why not do it today?

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