

Contentment
Exodus 20:17
4/7/13

Here is a poem I found very helpful for understanding what coveting is. It goes like this: “It was Spring, but it was Summer I wanted: The warm days and the great outdoors. It was Summer, but it was Fall I wanted: The colorful leaves and the cool, dry air. It was Fall, but it was Winter I wanted: The beautiful snow and the joy of the holiday season. It was Winter, but it was Spring I wanted: The warmth and the blossoming of nature. I was a child, and it was adulthood I wanted: the freedom and the respect. I was 20, but it was 30 I wanted: To be mature and sophisticated. I was middle-aged, but it was 20 I wanted: The youth and the free spirit. I was retired, but it was middle-aged I wanted: The presence of mind without limitation. My life was over, and I never got what I wanted.” Aren't we all like that in some area of our lives? Don't we always want something other than what we have? Maybe it's our station in life. Maybe it's our age. Maybe it's what we own. Maybe it's our relationships. Maybe it's even our spirituality, our spiritual gifts, or our spiritual accomplishments. Whatever it is, if we want something that someone else has and we are discontent, then we are coveting. Coveting wants something that we don't have that someone else has. Coveting is what is forbidden here, and contentment is what is commanded, if we remember the rule of opposites when it comes to the commandments: every prohibition implies the corresponding opposite positive command.

Now, we must make a distinction here, for we may think that any desire of anything we don't have is bad. But that is not necessarily the case. It is not necessarily wrong to want something that we don't have. It is not wrong to want to be married when one is not married. It is not even wrong necessarily to desire some physical thing that we do not have. What is wrong is to blame God for not providing enough for us, or to put our faith in the thing we want. It is also wrong to desire something that someone else has. That is the exact form in which this commandment comes to us. The message of the commandment is that we must be content, not covetous.

This is a remarkable commandment in many ways. For one thing, it is the only commandment that explicitly addresses the human heart. We have seen that all the other commandments have an inward component to them, but this commandment really does not have any external component. It is all about what goes on inside us. The external features of this sin have already been covered under the eighth commandment concerning theft.

Furthermore, this commandment can be seen as a window on all the other commandments. This is because all of the other sins have an element of covetousness involved in them. When we sin against the first four commandments, we covet what belongs to God, and when we sin against the last six commandments, then we covet what belongs to another human being. Furthermore, we fail to be content when we sin against any of the other commandments. So we sin not only in coveting what we should not covet, but we also sin in failing to be content where God has placed us in life. Therefore, if we were ever convinced that we were pretty good people, not needing God's grace, this commandment should be enough to change our minds about our own state.

Our culture, of course, loves to covet what does not belong to them. Our culture hates the very idea of contentment. Have you ever considered that the entire premise underlying the advertising world is that you are incomplete without this product? That the only way you can find fulfillment in life is if you purchase this product. You will not be this paragon of desirability unless you have this particular kind of motor oil in your vehicle. And sometimes, the ads are just that stupid. It doesn't even matter whether the particular quality of life has anything to do with the product they're selling. As long as they can get you to feel like you are missing out on something in

life, they have you by their hook. Mark Buchanan, a pastor, describes this advertising world, and the constant feeling of missing out, as “the cult of the next thing.” He describes it this way, “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 it sown ecstatic experiences: the spending spree. The Cult of the Next Thing's central message proclaims, 'Crave and spend, for the Kingdom of Stuff is here.'” Did you catch how easy it is to fall into the trap of this cult? All you have to do is do nothing to resist it. And it really is an entire religion. The object of worship is things. And it has all the trappings of religion to go right along with it.

But what is coveting, exactly? One author describes it this way, “a consuming desire to possess in a wrong way something belonging to another.” It is desiring something that someone else has. It is very easily seen when children are young. A toy that is of absolutely no inherent interest all of a sudden becomes all-important the very second another child has hold of it. And, of course, there is usually very little delay, if any, between the coveting and the stealing. Even in adults, the transition can be very short. It is certainly short in the mind: I want that thing, I deserve that thing, therefore I will take that thing.

This leads us to the opposite of coveting, which is contentment. Fortunately for us, contentment is not only the opposite of coveting, but it is also the antidote to coveting. Unfortunately for us, being content with what we have is usually quite as difficult as avoiding covetousness. It is a grace that only God can give. It is one of the fruits of the Spirit, in being related to the idea of “peace.” We are at peace with who we are, and who God has made us.

It is amazing sometimes how those people who are very poor can sometimes be very content with what little they have. Indeed, they often enjoy what they do have more than the rich people do, for everything that they have is much more valuable in their eyes. The stories that Gideons bring home often shows this. Many people in this world do not even own one single book. Then when a Gideon gives them a Bible, that immediately becomes their most treasured possession. Of course, poor people are just as guilty of sinning against the tenth commandment as the rich. Sin is an equal opportunity tempter. No matter what station in life a person is, they will be tempted to want something different than what they have. Having too much or having too little can both be sources of temptation for us. That is why Paul says in Philippians 4, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any an every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

More than any other sin, covetousness shows us our need for Jesus. As we read in the call to worship, Paul found out he was a sinner through this commandment. Even if we could explain away all the other commandments, thinking that we had obeyed them all, this last one would punch us right in the gut. For there is no avoiding the fact that we are covetous people. Our sin nature is by nature covetous. The secret, says Paul in Philippians, is Jesus Christ.

The solution is that Jesus Christ is fully sufficient for our every need. He has everything we need. We need to find our sufficiency in Him, and not anywhere else. This is quite literally impossible for us to do. For our own hearts don't want Jesus automatically at all. Indeed, our hearts

would much rather seek for sufficiency in something else or someone else, usually ourselves. But Jesus really is everything we need. Really He is. He is enough when we are hurting, for He has all comfort. He is enough when we are in want, for He makes us to lie down in green pastures. He is enough when we mourn the death of loved ones, for He is the resurrection and the life. He is enough when we are depressed, for the joy that was set before Him He not only has possession of now, but also gives to us. He is enough when we are slandered, for He will make all things right in the end. He is enough for us, and more than enough. When we are tempted to be covetous of anything, we need to go back to remembering that Christ is sufficient for us. We should never forget that we will inherit the new heavens and the new earth. We cannot possibly have more than that! All good things in their time appointed by God will come to us. We need to be patient.

Our joy in Christ needs to be full so that we are not full of envy when our neighbors are having what seems to be a better life than we have. It is our duty to rejoice when our neighbor does well, and even when our neighbor does better than we do. It is perfectly okay when that happens. We must beware of the sin of desiring our neighbor to do poorly just because we want them to look worse than we do. If by God's grace we avoid the sin of covetousness, and instead embrace contentment, then we will be able to go through life always having what we wanted (because we want what God gives!), and never experiencing disappointment. For Christ is our all in all.