

**Sermon File # 678**

**Scripture Text and Reading: Exodus 20:17; Luke 12:13-34**

**Sermon Title: *Commandment Ten: from Covetousness to Contentment***

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**Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.**

**Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.**

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## ***Commandment 10: from Covetousness to Contentment***

### **Introduction:**

Open your Bibles with me to our text, as we look together at the final and Tenth Commandment in our series from the Decalogue. We've seen these commandments as God's guidelines to his covenant people for a life that pleases him. As people of God's New Covenant, we've sought to understand and apply these commandments as Jesus himself taught and applied them in the Gospels. Rather than from a minimalist, legalistic understanding of the Decalogue, we've sought to understand the "surpassing righteousness" that Jesus says we must have to enter the Kingdom of God (Matthew 5:20). In the New Covenant and our life in the Spirit, we are called to understand and obey these commandments in a broader, positive and spiritual application.

With this 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment we actually come full circle with one that in a sense summarizes all the previous commandments and is an application of the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment to have no other gods before the Lord God (Oswalt, *NLTSB*, 159). Covetousness is greed, which Paul says is idolatry (Colossians 3:5), putting

possessions before God; and our Lord Jesus told a parable about a rich fool, whose covetousness destroyed his soul (Luke 12:13-21); then he told us the way of contentment, which should replace covetousness in the heart of a believer (22-34).

Follow, then, as I read our text from **Exodus 20: 17** and then from **Luke 12:13-34**.

Alongside the other commandments, such as against murder, adultery and stealing, this 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment appears somewhat tame (McEachern, 12). But as we study the meaning and significance of covetousness, we realize that this 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment is against the very “wellspring of immorality” (Honeycutt, 119). We note, even as Jesus tells us in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21f; 27f), that overt sin begins in the mind and heart (Francisco, 11).

James writes about this process of desire in the human heart that becomes sin:

“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is 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” (1:13-15).

Some people can rationalize and justify themselves as having kept the first nine commandments, at least in the outward, observable sense; but no one can claim to have kept this tenth one. Even the Apostle Paul, who claimed that he was ‘faultless’ as far as keep the Moral Law outwardly, had to admit that he failed in this 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment. In fact, it’s the one that convicted him that he was a sinner in need of God’s mercy and grace (Romans 7:7-13).

We can deceive others and even fool ourselves by avoiding the blatant disobedience to these commandments in the outward sense. Others may view us as good, righteous people. But if we’re honest with ourselves, we must admit that we’re guilty before God in what we have thought and in what we have desired. We fail at this point to have the kind of righteousness that Jesus says we must have to enter the Kingdom of God (Matthew 5:20), a righteousness that surpasses that of the morally, outwardly scrupulous behavior of the religious leaders of the day.

Obedience to the 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment and having a life that pleases God requires first of all our...

### **Facing Covetousness**

The verb for covet is also the word for desire (Hebrew *hamad*), a neutral word determined by its context. It can be used for a legitimate desire, such as for our basic needs, or an evil desire called covetousness, which is a lust for that which belongs to another (Honeycutt, 117).

As we face up to the reality of covetousness, we see its genesis is in...

### *Looking for the good life*

God is the creator of our natural and legitimate human appetites, and his will is to satisfy those appetites and fulfill those desires in his way and in his time. We may rightly desire good health and adequate provisions for a safe, secure and enjoyable life. Desire “is not in itself a bad thing, for one might honorably covet the great qualities which belong to someone who has made one’s hero and pattern and example” (Barclay, 196). Desiring certain material provisions also can be a legitimate desire of a follower of Christ. Paul writes that God “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Timothy 6:17). And the psalmist says “no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless” (Psalm 84:11c). God will give all of his obedient children everything that is necessary for a joyful life that seeks to honor him.

But sadly and tragically enough, our fallen sinful nature degrades our legitimate desires into covetousness, becoming dissatisfied with what we have and desiring what belongs to others.

As a vivid picture of our fallen sinful nature, observe the actions of young children at play. A three year old can be perfectly content playing with a toy until he notices another child playing with a different toy, which he had previously ignored. Suddenly he becomes obsessed with taking the other child’s toy (Ryken, 666), an action I observed while watching my little grandchildren at play last Christmas! And this is a graphic picture of us adults as well.

Just as with the other commandments, the problem is not with looking at what others possess or even being attracted by all the flashy advertisements that bombard us daily and even hourly. The problems begin when we allow looking to become...

### *Longing for the forbidden*

This commandment is comprehensive, beginning with the general and going into specifics. Our “neighbor’s house” is broken down into the details of our “neighbor’s wife, manservant, maidservant, ox or donkey,” which were familiar possessions that contributed to a full and adequate life for the Israelites (Durham, 298). Today in our culture we have our own list of relationships, pleasures and possessions that we think we need to be happy and content. It was Mark Twain (Samuel Clements) who said wryly that civilization is a “limitless multiplication of unnecessary necessities” (Quoted by Warren Wiersbe, 137f).

We see how comprehensive this 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment is, with longing and lusting leading us to the act itself (as with Jesus’ speaking about anger as the prelude to murder and lust leading to overt adultery, in Matthew 5:21f; 27f). Coveting is “the outstanding sin of our time, and lies at the root of our social dissatisfaction and economic troubles” (Ellison, 115). Covetousness and greed are certainly at the root of America’s financial woes, which were exacerbated by high level banking and other

financial institution scandals. On the individual level, coveting another's spouse or anything else that belongs to another, leads to discontent and fuels unhappiness. As one scholar commented in 1946, and how much truer his words today, "If the possession of things brought happiness and content, then this would be the happiest and most contented age in history" (Barclay, 204).

Longing for the forbidden will then lead to...

### *Losing the most valuable*

Jesus told the Parable of the Rich Fool, who was deceived and blinded by greed (covetousness), thinking life was all about hoarding and amassing wealth and possessions. God came to tell him he had been a fool, wasting his life on material gain to the loss of eternal life (Luke 12:13-21). An American slogan that appeared on bumper stickers (messages affixed to the rear bumpers of cars) spoke the tragically mistaken philosophy of the rich fool: "He who dies with the most toys wins." I don't know what these people think they will win, but I do know they will lose all their toys as well as their souls.

The disciples James and his brother John, even in the shadow of Jesus' final hours before the cross, were vying with their colleagues for a position of power and privilege in Jesus' consummated kingdom. Their self-centered ambition, their lust and coveting for power and privilege, alienated them from their fellow disciples (Mark 10:35-45).

With a tone of sarcasm, James, the half-brother of Jesus, says such "wisdom" is merely selfish ambition and is even of the devil. It leads only to "disorder and every evil practice" (James 3:13-16). He goes on to say that ambition and coveting leads to quarrels and fighting, and that self-centered ambition and lust is "friendship with the world" and is opposed to God (4:1-4). Paul also notes the deadly trap of lust, greed and covetousness:

"People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Timothy 6:9f).

Greed is idolatry, Paul adds (Colossians 3:5). And so indeed, with this 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment we see we've gone full circle. The 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment forbids idolatry, forbidding all other gods besides the Lord God. These commandments that encompass all the others go straight to the heart.

Jesus spoke of the heart, the innermost seat of our thoughts, emotions and will, as the source of our speech and our actions. Among other things that defile us, things that come out of our hearts, is greed (Mark 7:20ff). Our only hope, and the only way we can obey this 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment, is to get a new heart. Unless we receive God's grace to forgive us and give us a new perspective on life and possessions, the

result will be spiritual death. As James says, the we are tempted to sin by our own evil desire, and when desire is conceived and is full grown, it gives birth to death, spiritual and unless forgiven, eternal death (1:14f).

The rich young man wanted to have the eternal life Jesus offers, but was entrapped by his riches and thus unwilling to meet Jesus' demands to follow him. Jesus knew his god was his wealth, and he could not follow Jesus as Lord if money and wealth were his lord (Luke 18:18-30). The only the grace of God can release a greedy person from the enslavement of greed and covetousness.

At the heart of covetousness is a deep discontent with what one possesses, whether it is a marriage relationship, material possessions, career position or job, or status and sense of self-worth. The desires of the greedy and covetous are forever destined to be dissatisfied.

Saul of Tarsus was a young, highly educated religious scholar and was making high distinctions among his peers in the religious elite. He had everything going for him, and had an irreproachable reputation for observing the entire law, which was no small accomplishment. He thought he had kept all of the first nine of the Ten Commandments, until he came to Commandment Ten. He knew that in his heart he was covetous, perhaps of those who had a higher standing, or greater privilege and power, or whom he thought might be more upstanding and righteous than he knew himself to be. Whatever he coveted, this commandment served only to increase his covetousness and provided no relief from his guilt (Romans 7:7-14). The law made Saul face his sin of coveting but his only release from condemnation would come when he met Christ and found a new life in the Spirit.

The only hope for true satisfaction is through not only facing covetousness but also...

### **Finding Contentment**

"Because God has made us for Himself, our hearts are restless until they rest in Him," said Augustine of Hippo (AD 354 – 430). Not only are our hearts restless, but they're also dissatisfied. No amount of earthly possessions or even what we think of as the perfect spouse, job, living conditions or luxuries can ever give us true contentment.

A popular misconception of the Moral Law is that it is God's list of rules to keep his people under control. But the Ten Commandments were not given to rob us of life and joy but were given to point the way to the only truly satisfying and fulfilling life.

One of the wealthiest men in the world at the time was John D Rockefeller. When asked how much money it takes to make a man completely happy, he answered, "Just a little bit more" (Ryken, 672).

The only alternative and remedy to covetousness is contentment and the only way to find true contentment is in...

### *Seeking after God*

In his first letter to Timothy, when he warned against the pitfalls of covetousness, Paul gave us the only source of contentment:

“But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it” (1Timothy 6:6f).

Once again, we return full circle to the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment to have no other gods before the Lord God and to worship him exclusively and love him supremely, with all of our being, as expressed in the Great Commandment (Mark 12:29).

We should be people of desire, as CS Lewis reminds us when he says our desires are not too great but rather too weak. “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily pleased” (Lewis, 2). God wants us to satisfy our desires in his way and in his time, but above all he wants us to delight in and find deep joy in him.

As Jesus says in his beatitude, if we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we will be filled/satisfied (Matthew 5:6). Our hunger and thirst for the presence of God is to be on the same level as the desperate thirst of a deer, on the brink of death by thirst, longing for water:

“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Psalm 42:1f).

As one has pointed out, “The Tenth Commandment is unique” in that it “forbids a state of mind” instead of a wrong action and it “does not tell us how to stop coveting.” Rather, it calls for us to replace covetousness with a new pursuit, that of seeking God. And “if we seek him indeed, we shall find that going to church and praying are only the beginning, that our whole lives change from the heart outward until we are no longer interested in mammon. There is, in the last analysis,” she says, “only one way to stop covetousness and the destruction of body and soul that spring from covetousness, and that is to want God so much that we can’t be bothered with inordinate wants for anything else (Davidman, 127).

That’s my only solution. I become distracted by wrong desires and attracted toward things for which I can covet when I lose my focus on pursuing God and the full measure of my joy and life in him.

If we obey the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment and the Great Commandment and seek to love the Lord with our entire being and find our delight and enjoyment in him as he delights in us, then our coveting for lesser things and even lesser human relationships will die away in the wake of our new joy in and enjoyment of our Lord God.

When we focus on worshiping the Lord God alone, in obedience to the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment, and loving him as in the Great Commandment, we can trust him, not

only to supply our basic needs, as he promises (Luke 12:31 and Matthew 6:33), but also to give us the desires of our hearts (Psalm 37:4). So, we are coming full circle. To desire is in itself not a bad thing. It's the object of desire that's at issue. When we seek after and desire God in his fullness and to find our joy and contentment in him, then we're ready for...

### *Trusting in God*

In a relationship of loving God and following Jesus as Lord, we trust him to meet every need of ours. As well as meeting the basic needs, he gives us "all things for our enjoyment" (1 Timothy 6:17). Our loving heavenly Father knows not only our basic needs, but also what gives us pleasure and delight and he will not withhold any good thing from us (Psalm 84:11), that is, anything that honors him and that will increase our spiritual and eternal wealth (being "rich toward God," Luke 12:21).

In this lovely passage we read from Luke's Gospel, Jesus promises the heavenly Father's love and care for us, using the "how much more argument," comparing his value of us with the lesser value of ravens, which the Father cares for ("scavenger birds of the lowest rank." Bock, 349, on Luke 12:24).

A "greater to the lesser argument" is found in Paul's Letter to the Romans, where he teaches that God has already given to us his greatest, costliest gift—that of his Son. How then "will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (8:32). The Father in heaven has given us his Son, adopted us as his children, and has given us full rights and privileges as children of the King (Galatians 4:1-7). Will he then desert us and leave us as orphans?

Trusting in God's care and provision of all we need for a full and joyful life is the solution to a life of striving and covetousness. The Apostle Paul at times received his material needs through the generosity of the churches who supplemented his income. But he didn't depend on anyone, and his joy and contentment weren't based on the abundance of his material needs. Listen to these words of testimony:

"I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for 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 and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength....And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:10-13, 19).

In the light of these promises, coveting what belongs to someone else and what would be in the final analysis disappointing and even harmful to us, is a foolish alternative. God has a much better plan and far greater provisions than we could

ask or imagine for ourselves. We simply need to let go of worry and greed and trust in the Father's love, care and provision.

When our children were very small we gave them little glass piggy banks, where they could store their pennies and cash them in for something they eventually might want to buy. There was a slot at the top where pennies were deposited into the little bank and an opening at the bottom that was covered by a cap that was to be removed only when the bank was full of pennies. One day our son, Kyle, decided to "rob" his bank prematurely, and the opening at the bottom was just large enough for him to slip his hand through and grab a handful of pennies. He came crying to his mother, saying his hand was stuck in the bank. Because his fist was tightly holding the pennies, he could not pull his hand out of the glass bank. Nancy eventually persuaded him to let go of the pennies so that his hand could slip back out of the jar, then he could simply let the pennies fall through the hole.

We too need to learn to let go of greed, ambition, striving and ambition and simply trust. We can and must trust God not only to meet our need for the daily necessities, but to meet our need and desire for complete fulfillment, to give us what he intended for us from the very beginning of creation and redemption.

The little prayer that I printed, laminated and leave on my desktop by Mother Teresa is "May you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be." And may we also pray and trust that we are not only where we are meant to be, but have the job we were meant to have, the spouse and children we were meant to have, and are in the school we were meant to attend. May we trust that we have the possessions and opportunities that were meant by the heavenly Father for us. It all amounts to trusting the perfect love, wisdom and sovereignty of our loving heavenly Father.

We find contentment, not by seeking our own gratification, but by dying to self and losing ourselves in loving, following and...

### *Serving with God*

Christ says that dying to self and losing our self-centered lives we find true life in him (Matthew 16:24-28). This was the kind of life to which Jesus was inviting the rich young man, a life free from his financial greed and ambition. And God's grace is the only power that can release us and allow us the freedom to sell what we have, give to the poor, and follow him in obedient trust.

The assurance of God's provisions and the gift of contentment belong to those who seek his kingdom (Luke 12:31. Matthew 6:33 adds "seek *first* the kingdom *and his righteousness...*"). The closing verses of Jesus' promises describe an almost recklessly carefree life of serving with God, whereby we live and give randomly and freely to the poor, always investing in heavenly riches (Luke 12:33f).

That final verse (34) is often misunderstood and misinterpreted. It doesn't say that we should give where and how much our hearts say to give. We have selfish and sometimes greedy and covetous hearts, and if we let our giving be dictated by our

sinful hearts we would give scarcely or at best begrudgingly. But in fact, the idea is, when we give obediently and in faith as God's children, our hearts will come along and be blessed with joy and contentment. As is said by a Christian counselor acquaintance, it's easier to act our way into feeling than to feel our way into acting. If we wait until we feel like following and serving Christ in radical trust and obedience it'll never happen. But when we step out in faith, leaving behind self, self-centeredness and covetousness to follow and serve alongside Jesus, we'll find true contentment.

### **Conclusion:**

Just as was true for Saul of Tarsus, before the law and these 10 Commandments we all stand condemned except for the grace of God. Without the cross of Christ, we all would be under the sentence of death (Morgan, 117). Christ took the punishment for our sin, moral failure and guilt. Christ also demands that same righteousness from us (Mathew 5:20), but thanks be to God, he gives us his righteousness and a right standing with God through faith (Romans 5:1f: Galatians 2:16). By grace and through our faith in him, God gives us a new heart to love and follow Jesus as Lord in a new way of living and thinking (2 Corinthians 5:17). Jesus alone has fulfilled these Ten Commandments perfectly, in the positive and broader sense as well as the legal, minimal sense, and he will enable us also to follow these guidelines for a life that pleases God.

Instead of coveting another's spouse, repent, seek the Lord, find joy in him and ask him to show you how to love and delight in *your* spouse. If you are coveting another's job, recognition or success, ask God to forgive you and give you a desire to live for him and his glory and honor through *your* life. If you're coveting another's life, perhaps because of a deep and obsessive desire for marriage or children, ask God to *give you* a new joy, contentment and trust in him.

The key to obeying this command and all of God's Moral Law is in the Great Commandment, to love God with our entire being and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40). When we truly love God, we find our deepest peace, fulfillment, satisfaction and contentment. When we love our neighbor as Jesus loves him or her, we don't lust, we don't envy, but rather we want God's best for them. Instead of coveting, we will pray for and serve others, with a desire that God will bless them even more than he blesses us.

Instead of coveting, let's get on board with Christ Jesus and start giving faithfully, sacrificially, radically and even restlessly, as we join him in the cause of his Kingdom.

As we come to the Lord's Table today, I pray we will express our grateful love to him for the cross, and that we will celebrate his gift to us of his presence within us, even

as we partake of the bread and wine. As he said, his flesh is real food and his blood is real drink (John 6:55). We can and must find our deepest contentment in him and in our love relationship with his people, his Body on earth, his church. That's the life of true contentment.

### **Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:**

1. In what way is this 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment God's law against "the wellspring of immorality"?
2. What are some basic human desires that are good? What desires do you have that are legitimate?
3. When do our legitimate desires become covetous?
4. How can coveting lead to violating the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Commandments?
5. According to James 1:14&15, what might be the final outcome of coveting?
6. Why is a coveting heart never satisfied?
7. What is the solution to coveting? What is the key to finding true and lasting contentment?

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