

Covet Not

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Key Scripture

Exodus 20:17 (ESV) “You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.”

Sermon in One Sentence

Coveting, the insidious desire for what belongs to another, is a heart condition that undermines contentment, fuels sin, and ultimately distances us from the gracious provision and perfect will of God.

Introduction

Have you ever scrolled through social media, seen someone’s seemingly perfect life – their pristine home, their exotic vacation, their seemingly effortless success – and felt that little pang in your chest? That unpleasant, gnawing feeling of "I wish I had that... or *they* have that, and I don't"? Or perhaps you've been in a conversation where a friend proudly shares a new acquisition, and instead of pure joy for them, a shadow of comparison and longing falls over your own spirit. This ubiquitous human experience, this quiet, often unacknowledged struggle, is precisely what the tenth and final commandment addresses. It's a sin that often masquerades as ambition or healthy desire, but in its true form, it is a spiritual malignancy that can poison our souls.

The Ten Commandments are not merely a list of ancient rules; they are a divine revelation of God's character and His blueprint for human flourishing. While the first nine commandments deal with overt actions – murder, theft, adultery – the final command delves deeper, piercing the very thoughts and intentions of the heart. It targets the root cause from which many other transgressions spring. God, in His infinite wisdom, knows that before a wrong deed is committed, a wrong desire often takes root. He calls us not just to righteous actions but to righteous hearts, free from the destructive grip of covetousness.

Today, we turn to Exodus 20:17, the culmination of God's foundational law to His people, a commandment that remains profoundly relevant for us in the 21st century. As we unpack this powerful prohibition, my prayer is that we will gain a clearer understanding of what coveting truly is, how subtly it infiltrates our lives, and how, by God's grace, we can cultivate hearts of contentment and gratitude.

Historical & Biblical Context

The Ten Commandments, or the Decalogue, were given directly by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, shortly after Israel's miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt. This was a pivotal moment in the establishment of Israel as God's covenant people. The commandments served as the foundational law for their new society, defining their relationship with God and with one another. Unlike the sprawling legal codes of various ancient Near Eastern nations, these ten commands are succinct, profound, and universally applicable, meant

to shape a holy people set apart for God's glory.

The tenth commandment stands distinctively at the end, not as an afterthought, but as a crucial culmination. While the preceding commandments address outward actions and relationships (honor parents, do not murder, do not steal, etc.), "You shall not covet" dives into the interior life. It exposes God's concern for the heart, revealing that righteousness isn't merely about outward conformity but about inward disposition. For the Israelites, who were entering a promised land of abundance, this command would serve as a constant guard against the seductive allure of material gain and the comparison that often accompanies it, preventing them from falling into the very patterns of idolatry and selfishness that characterized the surrounding pagan nations. For us today, in an age saturated with consumerism and social comparison, this command is an equally vital guard against the subtle temptations that erode peace and spiritual vitality.

Main Point I — The Heart of Despair: Understanding Covetousness

Scripture: Exodus 20:17 Covetousness is not merely a strong desire; it is a misplaced, inordinate, and often envious desire for something that rightfully belongs to another. The Hebrew word used here, **■mad**, can mean "to desire, to lust after, to take pleasure in," but in this prohibitory context, it carries the weight of an unlawful grasping, a possessive longing that crosses a moral boundary. It's the yearning not just for *an* item like your neighbor's house, but specifically *for your neighbor's house*. It's the internal theft that precedes external action, the unholy longing that says, "I want what they have, and I wish it were mine instead of theirs."

This first point emphasizes the destructive nature of covetousness. It's a sin of comparison, where our contentment is dictated not by our own blessings, but by the perceived blessings of others. When we covet, we essentially tell God that His provision for us is insufficient, that His wisdom in allocating resources is flawed, and that His timing is somehow off. It births discontentment, gratitude's evil twin, and often leads to resentment towards the one who possesses the desired object. This internal struggle, if left unchecked, corrodes our joy, breeds anxiety, and pulls us away from a place of peace and trust in God's sovereign care.

Main Point II — The Seedbed of Sin: Covetousness as a Gateway Transgression

Scripture: James 1:14-15 (ESV) "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."

The Bible consistently portrays covetousness not just as a sin in itself, but as a dangerous precursor to many other sins. It is the insidious seedbed where other transgressions take root and flourish. The Apostle James eloquently describes this progression: desire, when left unchecked, becomes pregnant and gives birth to sin. We see this vividly in biblical accounts: David's coveting of Bathsheba led to adultery and murder; Ahab's coveting of Naboth's vineyard led to false witness and murder. Covetousness, by its very nature, refuses to be confined to the heart; it presses into action.

When we allow covetous desires to fester, they begin to distort our moral compass. What was once unthinkable – lying, cheating, stealing, even violence – becomes a tempting means to an end if it promises to fulfill the covetous longing. Mark 7:21-23 lists "coveting" among the evils that come from within the heart

and defile a person, placing it alongside sexual immorality, theft, murder, and deceit. This highlights its profound danger. It's not just about wanting something; it's about the deep-seated idolatry of wanting *that thing* so much that we are willing to compromise our values, harm others, or disobey God to obtain it. Ultimately, covetousness shifts our allegiance from God to the object of our desire, making that object our functional idol.

Main Point III — The Path of Peace: Cultivating Contentment

Scripture: Philippians 4:11b-13 (ESV) "For I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

If covetousness is the heart of despair and the seedbed of sin, then contentment is the path of peace and the fruit of faith. The antidote to coveting is not merely absence of desire, but the cultivation of a deeply rooted contentment in God's provision and sovereignty. Paul, writing from a prison cell, declares that he has "learned the secret" of contentment in every circumstance. This wasn't a natural disposition but a learned posture, forged on the anvil of experience and empowered by Christ. His contentment was not dependent on his circumstances changing, but on his unchanging relationship with God.

Cultivating contentment means consciously redirecting our focus from what we lack to what we have, and more importantly, to who God is. It means trusting that God, who owns "the cattle on a thousand hills" (Psalm 50:10), knows our true needs and provides generously according to His perfect will. It requires gratitude – a genuine, heartfelt thankfulness for every blessing, no matter how small, and especially for the spiritual riches we have in Christ. When we are truly content in Christ, the allure of our neighbor's possessions diminishes significantly. We find our satisfaction not in acquiring more, but in abiding in the One who is more than enough. Through Christ who strengthens us, we can indeed live a life free from the tyranny of coveting, finding joy and peace in Him alone.

Illustration

In the early 20th century, there lived a man named John R. Mott, an American evangelist and leader in the YMCA movement, who eventually became a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. He was known for his extensive travels and tireless work, but also for his simple lifestyle. On one occasion, he was on a train journey with a younger, very ambitious colleague. As they passed through a bustling city, the colleague pointed out magnificent mansions, luxury cars, and grand commercial buildings, remarking on the immense wealth some people possessed. He then turned to Mott and, with a touch of envy in his voice, said, "Mr. Mott, don't you ever wish you had some of that? Don't you long for a bit more comfort, more riches, more recognition than your tireless work often provides?" Mott paused, looked out at the passing landscape, and then turned back with a gentle smile. "My dear friend," he replied, "I have long ago discovered that all the good things of God and His creation which I truly need, I already possess in Christ. If I had any more, it would be a burden." His contentment was rooted not in what he owned, but in who owned him.

Practical Application

1. Practice Daily Gratitude: Take 5-10 minutes each day to specifically list (either mentally or by journaling) 3-5 things you are grateful for. Focus on tangible blessings, specific relationships, and God's faithfulness in your life. This reorients your heart away from lack.

2. Limit Exposure to "Comparison Triggers": Be mindful of social media feeds, television shows, or environments that consistently prompt feelings of inadequacy or envy. While not everything needs to be avoided, consciously filtering or reducing exposure to these triggers can safeguard your heart.

3. Give Generously: Intentionally practice giving a portion of your time, talent, or treasure away. Generosity breaks the hold of materialism and covetousness, reinforcing the truth that we are stewards, not ultimate owners, and that true joy comes from giving.

4. Reflect on God's Provision: Regularly meditate on passages of Scripture that speak to God's abundant provision and His care for you (e.g., Matthew 6:25-34, Psalm 23, Philippians 4:19). Remind yourself that He knows your needs and is faithful to supply them.

5. Pray for Others' Blessings: When you find yourself admiring – or worse, envying – someone else's possessions, achievements, or relationships, consciously choose to pray for their continued blessing and flourishing. This spiritual exercise helps transform envy into genuine joy for others.

Discussion Questions

1. In what subtle ways does covetousness manifest in our modern, consumer-driven society? Can you identify a specific area where you personally feel tempted by it?

2. Why do you think God placed the command against coveting as the tenth, and final, commandment, delving into the heart's desires after dealing with overt actions?

3. Read James 1:14-15 again. How does identifying the "lure and enticement" of desire help us combat covetousness before it "gives birth to sin"?

4. What practical steps can you take this week to cultivate a spirit of contentment and gratitude in your daily life?

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we confess that our hearts so often stray into the dangerous territory of coveting. Forgive us for our discontentment, for our misplaced desires, and for the times when we have doubted Your good provision. Lord, transform our hearts by Your Spirit, renewing our minds so that we may desire only what is good and pleasing in Your sight. Help us to find our greatest joy and satisfaction in You, our glorious God, and to live with open hands and grateful hearts, trusting in Your perfect plan for our lives. Amen.

Benediction

Now may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21, adapted)