

Women's Bible Study Fall 2010

10 Apps For Life: A Modern Look at the Ten Commandments

December 1, 2010

God's Contentment: Exodus 20:17

Gretchen Steer



The internet is a wonderful source of information about everything. To a closet hypochondriac it's even better, because you can read about virtually illness online. If you're like me you can imagine you have a disease simply by reading about its symptoms. All these medical information sites usually have an overview of the illness; then signs and symptoms leading to diagnosis, and third, treatment options. If you look at today's outline you'll notice that I followed that format, and for good reason, because today's topic, covetousness, is a type of soul sickness.

However, when setting up this series we chose to put all the commandments in a positive form, calling this talk "God's Contentment," as opposed to "My horrible problem with covetousness." You see, at the end of the day, contentment is the antidote to covetousness. So we'll talk about both covetousness and contentment today, and we can start by turning to Exodus chapter 20, verse 17.

Like any disease, we have to start with an

I. Overview

And ask ourselves,

A. What is it?

Covetousness is desiring what belongs to someone else. The Hebrew verb means "to desire something deeply". But why would it be wrong to desire something deeply? The Psalmist talks about seeking God in those terms: **"O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water."** (Psalm 63:1). Paul tells us to **"eagerly desire the greater gifts"** in 1 Cor. 12:31. These phrases evoke the idea of desiring something deeply – something good that God alone can provide. And that is no sin. So what makes covetousness a sin?

Covetousness is desiring what belongs to someone else, **which we have no right to possess.** Look at the wording of Exodus 20:17: **"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."** It's ok to covet, or earnestly desire, what God alone can provide. We know that God is the provider of every good thing, and that includes fundamental requirements like shelter, food, clothing, and relationships as well as our spiritual needs. It's all right to earnestly desire that God meet our needs, because we know that he can. And that's why we can covet, in the sense of "earnestly desire", good things like a deeper relationship with God. What makes covetousness sinful is when we start to earnestly desire what already belongs to another person, whether that's their husband, their job, their house or even their spiritual life.

B. Why include it?

I know a 7th grade science teacher who used to teach scientific classification putting objects in a row and making the students sing the Sesame Street song, "One of these things is not like the other...one of these things just doesn't belong...". You had to pick out the one that didn't fit with

the others. This commandment sort of feels that way. It's in the section on human relationships, commandments 5 through 10, and yet it alone speaks to a heart attitude rather than an action.

But it does belong where God's placed it, for these reasons.

First, *it demonstrates that the Commandments are not just another civil law code.*

They are different. They reflect God's standards, and all of those standards make a good basis for civil law. But governments can only legislate action, not attitude. So God's law is different because it finds both internal heart attitude and external action to be equally worthy of judgment.

Second, *it foreshadows Christ's teaching on the law.*

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes the 10 Commandments and turns them into internal principles as well as standards of behavior. So the commandment "Don't murder" (Exodus 20:13) becomes "Do not be angry at your brother" in Matthew 6. "Don't commit adultery" becomes "Don't lust". Of course, it was God's intention all along to convey principles of the heart as well as rules for behavior, but this commandment, "Do not covet", is the one that spells out the relationship between attitude and action. By doing that it helps us cut off sin at the root. Sin always begins in the mind with the motivation to steal, or ruin another's reputation by lying, because we want what they've got.

And third, and most important, *the tenth commandment teaches us that no one can keep the law.*

Think about this for a moment. If we are not very self-examining, we might imagine that we're keeping the laws about God (no other gods, no idols, not taking his name wrongly); that we're honoring the Sabbath and our parents, and that we're not murdering, committing adultery, stealing and lying. In other words, we could delude ourselves that we have succeeded in keeping the law on our own merits. But I don't think anyone can go through life without coveting what belongs to another person. It's truly part of being human. Cain coveted Abel's relationship with God, and killed his brother in anger. Small children cannot keep their hands off another kid's toy. It is part of the fabric of being a fallen human, and this commandment tells us that we cannot keep the law on our own. That's why God included a commandment addressed to our hearts instead of our actions. This tenth Word leads us to our need for a Savior.

Martin Luther, in his Large Catechism, gives a wonderful description of the tenth commandment: **"This last commandment therefore is given not for rogues in the eyes of the world, but just for the most pious, who wish to be praised and be called honest and upright people, since they have not offended against the former commandments."** This is the commandment that should convince us that we're sinners, because everyone stumbles over it.

A third question...

C. What's so bad about covetousness?

It's a mindset that leads in three bad directions.

First, covetousness results in sinful action.

Sin never just happens. It starts in the mind with desire. It might be the desire to get even that leads someone to slander another. It might be the desire for another woman's husband that leads to adultery. But it always starts in the mind. Outward sin is just a manifestation of the soul's sickness, and that sickness usually begins with coveting.

Paul explains this idea of a root sin in Romans, **“Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, ‘Do not covet.’ But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire.” (Romans 7:7-8).**

It’s not the law that was bad, but rather, the sin already lurking within us that twists the law’s commands to make us a slave to sin, until we are liberated by Christ. Of all the commandments, Paul said that the tenth, do not covet, was what taught him how our sinful nature is automatically in defiance of the law.

Second, covetousness leads to chronic dissatisfaction with God.

When we covet what we don’t have, it makes us dissatisfied with what God has provided for us. Remember that it’s not wrong to earnestly desire that God provides the basic needs of our life, but that it is wrong to earnestly desire what someone else has and we don’t. Notice how the commandment talks about our neighbor’s possessions, assuming that our neighbor was the person we could always see nearby whose possessions might trigger our envy. But the world is a tiny place now, thanks to technology, and this greatly expands the potential for covetousness. We can see and envy everyone, even people unknown to us. The temptation to covet is probably greater now than at any time in history, simply because we’re exposed to so much.

This is the time of year when consumerism is at its highest peak because it’s cloaked in the good motive of “getting gifts for others”. But is that really what drives people to get in fistfights at the bargain counter on Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, the heaviest shopping day of the year?

On November 9 an inventive group of people decided to counteract the shopping frenzy by breaking into the Hallelujah Chorus in the middle of Macy’s in Philadelphia. An organ had been playing Christmas music in the store, and 600 members of the local choral societies, including the Philadelphia Opera Society, were disguised as shoppers scattered throughout the store’s many floors. Exactly at noon the organ thundered into the opening strains of Handel’s Messiah and the singers burst into song. Shoppers paused, gazed open mouthed, and took video on their phones. “King of Kings, and Lord of Lords” resounded through Macy’s for five minutes. What a great reminder of why we celebrate Christmas! Interestingly, this event came to us courtesy of the Knight Foundation’s “Random Acts of Culture” grant. The Knight Foundation sees this as injecting culture into modern society. But Handel saw his work as injecting God’s praise into music. And any time we are reminded to praise God rather than fret about what we don’t have is a time that we’ll stop coveting. When covetousness flourishes, it makes us unsatisfied with God.

Third, covetousness is a sin against God.

All the Commandments come back to this: when we sin, we sin against God. Coveting says to God that he is not enough for us. We do not trust him to provide what we need, which is a falsehood against his character. He is not first in our lives. This is where covetousness shows it’s a disease of the soul.

We look next at the

II. Signs and Symptoms of Covetousness

Even though covetousness is an inner attitude it’s betrayed by outward signs. Here are four of them.

1) We show it in our thoughts, conversation and actions.

We can't help but show what we're thinking about through our actions and conversation. It more or less leaks out, perhaps in something as subtle as an expression of greed or envy on our faces, but more likely in what we talk about and how we spend our time. If we're always focused on material things – tangible goods, our job, our home - and we're never talking, doing or thinking about spiritual things, we're probably suffering from covetousness.

Now I must admit, with a wedding looming up sometime next year there is a lot of discussion going on about wedding dresses in our house. Ideally, our daughter Emily would like to find the perfectly fitting dress of her dreams on E-bay for \$20. I suggested that she save a lot of money and time and wear my dress, which we pulled out of the box where it had rested for the past 33 years in my mom's basement, and which you can see is highly stylish in this picture. Stylish, that is, for the late '70's. But apparently styles have changed and brides no longer wear long sleeves and high necks. With the best intentions it is still hard not to get drawn into the desire for a beautiful, gorgeous, lacey... and ridiculously expensive dress. Even with a simple thing like a wedding dress, we can begin to dwell only on the material aspects and forget about the purpose of a wedding, which is to springboard us to a lifelong marriage. What we think about, talk about and how we spend our time demonstrates what is inside our hearts. So take a moment to reflect on how you've been spending your time in the past week. Covetousness is just waiting in the wings for all of us unless we hack away at it.

Another symptom of the disease of covetousness is that we're

2) Too busy for spiritual life

If worldly concerns are always crowding out spiritual ones, then we're probably struggling with covetousness. The Apostle John tells us **“The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” (John 12:25)** That doesn't mean we should have no concern for how to feed and clothe our families or ourselves. But it does mean that prayer, scripture, and reflection should also be in our thoughts every day along with all the secular things we must attend to.

One trap is trying to multitask, when we divide our time among too many activities and people. A month ago I was at the ATM, in my car doing my banking. But I was also unwisely chatting on the phone to our son, who called as I was pulling up. I finished my banking and drove away, still talking. Several hours later I noticed that my debit card was missing from my wallet. So panic ensued and I made several calls, and checked my account online, to see whether it had been stolen. Everything seemed fine, so I asked the folks at the branch where I banked to check the ATM machine. Apparently there is a feature whereby the machine sucks the card back in after 30 seconds if it hasn't been removed by the consumer. So they were able to retrieve it and give it to me the next day.

Now this never would have happened had I not been on the phone. I was not attending to something quite important – the security of my bank card – because I was attending to someone that I love. And we get in this dilemma all the time because our lives are filled with people and tasks that clamor for our attention. We can hardly keep up with our relationships and responsibilities, let alone our spiritual lives. Ah, but there's the trap. If we always let everything else crowd out our time with God, our moments with his Word, we'll slip into the place where our heads are only filled with material things, and there covetousness will begin to have a field day. Jesus told a parable about the sower and the seeds in Matthew 13. He said that some of the seed fell among thorns,

which grew up and choked the plants. Jesus explained: **“The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.” (Matthew 13:22)** If we’re too busy for our spiritual life, we’re too busy...period.

Another sign of covetousness is that we

3) Don’t care *how* we get what we want as long as we *get it*.

You’ve probably heard the phrase: The end justifies the means. But it doesn’t. And in the case of covetousness, the end isn’t justified either! To covet what belongs to another might mean that we’re willing to steal, like Achan in Joshua 7, whom we looked at a few weeks ago under the commandment “Do not steal.” Or it might mean that we are willing to take another person’s spouse, like David did when he wrongfully took Bathsheba from her husband in 2nd Samuel 11. We want, we take. But the end doesn’t justify the means, if what we take already belongs to someone else. You see how coveting leads to stealing or lying? Or, in David’s case, to murder?

Have you noticed how quickly that new purchase, even a new house or car, becomes taken for granted and old hat? One year we bought a new-to-us used van whose owner had kept it just immaculate. And so did I, for about 6 months. Then life and commuting to school caught up with us and I could see its former owner peering sadly in the dirty windows with a look of dismay on his face when I parked at church. Once I got used to the new vehicle it became commonplace and I began to treat it that way. So lusting after things that we want is a yearning that will not be satisfied by obtaining them – at least not for very long. And the more we want them, the more we are willing to do anything to obtain them.

Fourth, our coveting hearts are revealed when

4) We pursue what belongs to others

Stop and ask yourself what has been most on your mind in the past day. What are we thinking about all the time? Is it the car that the Joneses drive or the kitchen that Mrs. Smith just put in, is it the new Ipad your co-worker is using or the stylish dressing of that woman in your small group? If that’s what we’re thinking about, it’s covetousness. If we dwell on what others have it will either lead to sinful action or chronic dissatisfaction with God. Most of us never act on our envy. But the poison of coveting makes us bitter about our lot and unresponsive to God. It destroys inner peace.

So far we’ve been speaking in the context of wanting others’ material goods. But I think that it’s far more dangerous to covet less tangible possessions. Like power. Or another’s spirituality. Or their happy lives. So I’d like to make a few comments. Usually when we envy someone we don’t see the whole picture. We might envy their power and leadership ability, without realizing the tremendous cost and stress that leadership brings. We might covet another person’s deep faith without realizing that God has put them through the fire of suffering to get them to that place of trust. In the end, seeking what belongs to others will only make us ungrateful for what God has given us.

So what’s the

III. Treatment for covetousness

When you get to the “Treatment” section in a medical book or website, there are usually several options, and often they are taken all together. So here are four suggestions to treat the soul sickness of covetousness.

First is

1) Simplicity.

The early American hymn says “It’s a gift to be simple, it’s a gift to be free, it’s a gift to turn out where you ought to be.” It’s a gift, yes, but we can stretch out our hand and take that gift by choosing to simplify our lives. There are magazines and books about simplifying. There are seminars on how to declutter and organize. But the greatest motivator for simplicity is that it helps us hold our possessions lightly. If we don’t have very many things, then we will fret less about them. And we won’t constantly be worrying about whether they all match, or are in style, or need to be replaced because we’re not happy with them. Jesus said, **“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...” (Matthew 6:19-20)** When we act like Christ to those around us, we are storing up treasures in heaven.

Second is

2) Giving.

You might remember that giving is an antidote to stealing, from our study of the 8th commandment. That principle applies here, too. We can’t covet if we continually give away what we have to others who need it. Giving, like simplicity, teaches us to hold our possessions lightly. And it also teaches us that what we have comes from God, and is merely a tool for him to use. We’re stewards, not landowners.

When John and I were young and poor in the ministry we would occasionally receive a gift of money from someone in the church. Often this was anonymous. And these gifts were so very much appreciated – it seemed as though they came directly from the hand of God. Now that we are better off we try to be alert to others who need help in that same way. If you have received in your life you should discover that it’s just as sweet to give – actually more so. And sacrificial giving really puts our values on the line. When Jesus spoke to a rich young ruler who wanted to follow him, Jesus said

“If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Matthew 19:21)

And the young man walked away sorrowfully. This was just too great a price to pay. Would you or I walk away, or would we sell up and follow Christ?

A third treatment for covetousness is

3) Thankfulness.

Now we’re getting into the heavy artillery. To be thankful every day is one of the greatest counters to dissatisfaction with God.

Our three children were home for Thanksgiving. We were lazing around in front of the fire in the den and one of them said to me, “Do you realize how good you have it here?” It was an interesting question. I responded that John and I are verbally thankful almost every day for our family, our church, our health, our home. Sure, not everything is perfect. But life is sweet, and if we don’t dwell on what cannot be, we will learn to be content with what we do have. Paul told Timothy, **“For**

everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving...” (1 Timothy 4:4)

Sometimes an experience of loss or disappointment can serve to make us more thankful for what we have. How could I not enjoy my children, when I know what it feels like to lose one for them for good? In the bleakest of circumstances, there is always God to be thankful for: **“We give thanks to you, O God, we give thanks, for your Name is near; men tell of your wonderful deeds. You say, ‘I choose the appointed time; it is I who judge uprightly. When the earth and all its people quake, it is I who hold its pillars firm.’” (Psalm 75:1-3)**. Even in the worst time, God holds us firmly. So rather than concentrate on what we don’t have (which is what covetousness does), let’s concentrate on what we do have (which is what thankfulness does.)

Finally, and most importantly, we have

4) Holy Spirit power.

Every treatment I’ve suggested so far (simplicity, giving, thankfulness) can only get us so far. You may already be feeling defeated, if you’re someone who is covetous by nature. In the few times in my life when I really wanted something that someone else had, I found it to be a frighteningly strong emotion. It’s really impossible to be victorious over our covetous human nature in our own strength. But it is possible with God. The key to breaking the hold of covetousness is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In Romans 8 Paul reminds us that because of Christ, we have received a new nature, and now we’re not at the mercy of our old sinful emotions:

“You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature, but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you.” (Romans 8:9)

The only way that the Spirit of God can live in us is when we have acknowledged Jesus as our Lord. But after that point, when we have passed from death into life, the Holy Spirit lives in us. And when we listen to and are guided by him, life changes. Paul says,

“Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.” (Galatians 5:25)

This term “keep in step with” gives the picture of a military parade, where every person is exactly in sync with the person next to him. The person next to us is the Holy Spirit, and when we match our strides to his we will never be out of step with God’s desires for us. When the Holy Spirit moves in us and we become responsive to his voice, it is much harder to give into mental patterns like covetousness and envy. There is a way to break the chain of covetousness which leads to sin and bitterness against God’s provision.

I guess you could say one final thing about covetousness. If the treatment for this soul sickness is simplicity, giving, thankfulness and Holy Spirit power, then the lifelong antidote is Contentment.

IV. Antidote to Covetousness is Contentment

You see, the contented person is almost impervious to covetousness. A thankful heart tells us that we have everything we need in Christ, so why should we envy what other people have? Paul reminds Timothy of this when he says,

“But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.” (1st Timothy 6:6-8)

One Saturday last spring I rode my bike along a nearby county road and saw in the dirt what looked like a Bible. So I stopped, rode back, picked it up and opened it. Sure enough, it was a Bible. Not just any Bible, but a Bible belonging to James Robert Fischer. James Fischer...son of Juli and Phil, friend of my kids, well known to many of us. What was James' Bible doing by the side of the road? As it turned out he had played basketball that morning with a group of people, put his Bible on top of the car, and drove off. The Bible stayed there for miles until it slid off and was found by me less than an hour later.

Now this Bible had been with James all over the world. He hadn't even realized he'd lost it before he was notified that it was found. We know from scripture that the Word of God is living and active, but I didn't know that it could find its own way back home! Later that day I opened my own Bible and read this passage:

“The rain and snow come down from the heavens and stay on the ground to water the earth. They cause the grain to grow, producing seed for the farmer and bread for the hungry. It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it.” (Isaiah 55:10-11)

“It will prosper everywhere I send it,” God says. God has sent his Word into our hearts in these past three months as we've studied his law in the Ten Commandments. Has it prospered? First, if you have been sitting through these weeks and still are not sure what it means to have a relationship with Jesus Christ, please speak to your group leader or to one of us teachers. This is too important to put off. Second, if you're overwhelmed by God's standard in these Ten Words, remember that the law is put in place to help us understand our need for a Savior. We cannot keep the law. But Jesus can. And third, when you're going home today, please remember to put your Bible IN your car, not on top of it. ☺

***WBS is a ministry of Autumn Ridge Church – Rochester, MN 55902
Questions: email wbs@autumnridgechurch.org
www.autumnridgechurch.org***