

Value Contentment

Exodus 20:17

Introduction

Greed is alive and well in America – personal greed, corporate greed. Everything is about the bottom line. To illustrate how twisted the rationalization of greed becomes, listen to this from Ivan Boesky who went to prison in the late 80's for insider trading:

Greed is all right. By the way, I think greed is healthy. You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself.

The 1987 movie Wall Street was based somewhat on Boesky's situation. In it, one of the characters declares: "Greed is good! Greed is right! Greed works! Greed will save the USA!"

The tenth and last commandment is probably the greatest one of the second section of the Ten Commandments. It goes beyond regulating outward acts to proscribing inner attitudes. All the others deal with specific actions: "Don't do this or that." Only this 10th commandment forbids a state of mind and heart.

Perhaps it appears last because the sin it prohibits – covetousness – is the most treacherous of all. Dr. David Seamands writes:

We need victory at this point more than any other. Covetousness makes people greedy and causes them to steal. Covetousness drives people to sacrifice the lives of others, even to kill, for their own ends. Covetousness gives rise to that unbridled lust which plunges individuals into idolatry. Covetousness endangers mutual trust and causes people to lie about themselves and each other, to gain money, power, prestige or praise.

Think for a moment about the great Hebrew king, David. He broke the 8th commandment: "You shall not steal" – he took what was not his: Bathsheba. He broke the 7th commandment: "You shall not commit adultery." He broke the 6th commandment: "You shall not murder" – as he arranged for Bathsheba's husband's death in battle. All because he broke the 10th commandment: "*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 belongs to your neighbor.*" (Exodus 20:17)

Turn in your New Testament to the letter of James. – **James 3:13-15** The words "bitter jealousy" mean "bitter envying" or "coveting." James says this attitude is demonic – it is from Satan.

Satan's most basic attack is covetousness. **Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-6**

Eve saw; she desired; she took. Satan's basic approach to tempting people: not to be satisfied with what we have – not to be content with what God has given us.

Satan conspires to breed into people a discontent about what they have, to want more and more, and in so doing, first of all, makes that person's life miserable, and then, secondly, makes that person's life vulnerable to all sorts of evil.

I. What is Covetousness?

The Hebrew word means "to have desire" or "to delight in something." Are desires wrong? No, of course not. But we must be careful to distinguish between just desires and covetousness.

Covetousness is an inordinate desire for something, which in and of itself, may be perfectly legitimate and delightful. It is a desire taken to illegitimacy. The commandment says, "Do not desire delightful things wrongly. Do not let desire run unchecked." Seamands says:

It is desire that runs rampant over the rights of others and even over one's own reason. It is desire run amuck which will injure or destroy to get what it wants."

This commandment forbids undisciplined desire. Covetousness becomes a refusal to stop – a refusal to "Just say no!" – a refusal to limit yourself with what God has given you.

God gives us desires, but He also put boundaries, limits around some things. He has put limits on desires lest they run unchecked and lead to disaster. God has said in certain areas: "Don't touch," "You may not have that."

Remember, we are not saying that the desire to achieve, excel, to succeed, is wrong. To acquire things is fine. To work, to create, to be productive in life is good. God gave us the will, the power, the creativity to do this.

Covetousness is a legitimate desire taken to an extreme and going beyond the boundaries set by God. It is the insatiable desire to have more and more and more.

II. Where is the distinguishing line? What principles govern the difference?

A. God says, "Don't desire excessively." "I need that." "I can't live without that."

Translation: "I want that!" We become consumed with greed, unwilling to be content with

what we have. The difference is when we become overwhelmed with desire. We just cannot be satisfied. Erich Fromm, psychoanalyst and social philosopher wrote:

Greed is a bottomless pit which exhausts the person in an endless effort to satisfy the need without ever reaching satisfaction.

John D. Rockefeller was once asked: “How much money do you need to be happy?” His reply: “A little more.”

B. God says, “Don’t desire illegitimately.” – That is to desire something we are not to have. Look at the commandment again – “*You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet you neighbor’s wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*” Ownership is one way God puts boundaries around things. God denies us certain things by letting others own them or possess them instead of us.

In Joshua 6, the Israelites go out to battle against the city of Jericho. They are beginning the conquest of the land promised to Abraham. God forbid the soldiers from taking spoil from the city because it was to be set apart for God.

Joshua 6:18-19 Now: **Joshua 7:1** The army of Israel went against the next city, Ai, and failed miserably as God judged Israel for the sin in her midst. Joshua found the culprit – Achan. Look at this description: **Joshua 7:20-21**

He saw it; he coveted it; he took it; he hid it. God had said, “You may not have that.” Achan said, “I don’t care. I want it!”

C. God says “Don’t desire exploitively.” – to take advantage of other people. The Apostle Peter writes:

Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words. – *2 Peter 2:2-3*

Peter is speaking of false prophets here. Greed, covetousness drives many to exploit others. In the religious world, they are all around – surf through your cable channels and look for those who give lengthy, guilt-induced, shameless fund appeals promising health, wealth and prosperity if you will give them money.

In his book *The Integrity Crisis*, Warren Wiersbe quotes Russ Reid, who founded the large marketing and public relations company – The Russ Reid Agency – in talking about a lot of religious television personalities:

Television preachers justify their fund raising on the basis that they are reaching the unchurched. Yet the facts do not support their claim. In a study done for the national Council of Churches and the National Religious Broadcasters (in 1984), it was estimated that 13 million people watch television preachers at least once during the week. Of the audience, only one million were unchurched. Yet the electronic church is spending one billion dollars to reach one million unchurched.

III. Why Is Covetousness So Wrong?

A. Covetousness leads to dishonesty and injustice if driven to have something that someone else has. Listen to Paul's words written to Timothy:

But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. *–1 Timothy 6:9-10*

1 Kings 21 tells the story of Ahab, king of Samaria, who coveted the garden of Naboth close to his palace. It is a story of injustice which brings upon the king the judgment of God.

B. Covetousness makes us vulnerable to exploitation. What is the basis of most advertising? Buying what you don't need, what you can't afford to keep up with the Joneses who you don't like.

C. Covetousness replaces God as the focus in our lives. Things, people and satisfaction take the place of God. Listen to the way Jesus put it:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.
– Matthew 6:24

D. Covetousness robs us of the possibility to be satisfied, content. Listen to Solomon's observation in the book of Ecclesiastes:

He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity. When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much; but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.
– Ecclesiastes 5:10-12

E. Covetousness is idolatry. Listen to these two statements by the Apostle Paul:

For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.
– *Ephesians 5:5*

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. – *Colossians 3:5*

IV. How Do You Counter Covetousness?

A. Contentment – 1 Timothy 6:6-8

This word “content” was one of the great watchwords of the Stoic philosophers. By it they meant an entire and complete self-sufficiency. Paul uses it in his writings to mean a frame of mind which is completely independent of all outward and external things, and which carries the secret of happiness within itself.

- Focus on what you have, not on what you don’t have. The great 19th century English preacher, Charles Spurgeon, wrote: “It’s not how much we have, but how much we enjoy, that makes happiness.”
- Develop the heart attitude of thankfulness / gratitude for who you are and what you have.
- Focus on the faithfulness of God. The writer of the book of Hebrews admonishes us:

Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you. – *Hebrews 13:5*

B. Don’t forget the temporal nature of things. Jesus said, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” (Luke 12:15)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke about the impermanence of things on earth –
Matthew 6:19-21

C. Develop a giving spirit – This counters the creeping sin of covetousness. By the way – why does God want you to give? Does he need your spare change on Sunday? It is not only a recognition that everything belongs to God, given to us for our stewardship. It is a protection over our hearts, lest we begin to feel we must “possess” our blessings. Albert Schweitzer: “If you own something you cannot give away, you don’t own it; it owns you.”

D. Live with an eternal perspective – Colossians 3:1-3

Conclusion

Contentment is a condition of the heart – an attitude – realizing that God will provide for me; that I can live within the boundaries God has given me.

The question really ought not to be: “Why hasn’t God given me more?” But rather, “God, why have you given me all that I have?” Why should I have good health, food to eat, a place to live, nice clothes and car, friends, etc.?”

May God give us the grace to be content. Might we have the right focus. And may we submit to God’s Word – including the Ten Commandments – that we might experience life as God has intended us to – a life within which He has free access to our hearts, our minds, our wills.

Now turn back in your Old Testament to the book of Exodus, chapter 20.

Exodus 20:18-21

Here was the manifestation of this holy God who was giving these instructions to Moses. The people saw and heard this and were afraid. Moses indicates that God’s purpose in giving them the law was that they should not sin by disobeying his Word.

God has given us his Word, and his Holy Spirit who indwells us, that we may not sin by disobeying him. He desires to have fellowship with us, to lead us in a life that is pleasing to him, a life that works in the way in which we were created to live to enjoy his presence and the joy that comes from obedience.