

The Thief of Contentment

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on August 30, 2020.

“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” (Exodus 20:17).¹

What is coveting? Is it merely a desire for something we do not have? In pop-Evangelical-speak, someone may say, “I covet your prayers,” drawing from the King James translation of the word “desire.” The idiom is used simply to say, “Please, pray for me.” Is that a sinful desire? Of course not. What then is coveting? As the word is used in the tenth commandment and translated in modern English, coveting is only used in a negative sense in the Bible, meaning essentially an immoral desire.

We should be diligent then to rescue our understanding of this word. For, it means neither a godly desire nor healthy ambition. Unlike the mystic concept of desire, it is not a sin to desire a house, a spouse, a job, or even wealth. It is not a sin to desire, long for, or think about nice things, bettering yourself, or improved circumstances. In fact, it is not a sin to pray to God for these things. In the midst of the 24-hour stomach bug, I pray for hour 25!

Consider these examples from Scripture: Hannah did not sin when she prayed to God for a child. The groom does not sin when he desires his bride in the Song of Solomon. Does Proverbs encourage us to sin with the practical advice given for self-improvement? Is the Apostle Paul sinning when he desires to die and be with Christ? No! Let us rescue desire from the Stoics of old and the mystics of the new age.

And, let us rightly understand what “You shall not covet” means, beginning with this: The commandment doesn’t say only “You shall not covet,” does it? The commandment actually commands *what* we are not to covet and from *whom*. We shall not covet our neighbor’s house our neighbor’s spouse, or our neighbor’s things.

As the second great commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39), summarizes the second table of the Moral Law, the second six commandments cannot be broken or obeyed without our neighbor. As it turns out, dishonoring your parents or authority is impossible without your neighbor. You cannot murder or hate someone without your neighbor. It’s impossible to commit adultery or lust without your neighbor. You can’t steal if there is no one to steal from. And, you cannot bear false witness against your neighbor if your neighbor doesn’t exist. So it is with coveting: a sinful desire for what is your neighbor’s.

Coveting and Our Neighbor

Someone might argue, “If coveting is a sinful desire for my neighbor’s house, or spouse, or things, how is that not loving my neighbor? It may be sin, but it’s a sin of the heart that does not

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

The Thief of Contentment

unlovingly impact my neighbor.” Of course, this is like the man who lusts over other women, thinking it has no bearing on his marriage. Yet, he is blinded to how his lust impacts how he relates to his wife. It is like the woman who despises one of her fellow-church members. Yet, she is blinded to how her hatred impacts how she responds to others.

Similarly, we may dismiss coveting, as a secret sin, unknown to others, perhaps to be harbored or indulged. But coveting blinds us to our selfishness. When we covet, we don't care about our neighbor's best interest but instead think only about what we want, what would make us happy, what would make our lives better, regardless of how it affects others.

We look at our neighbor's house and think: why do they have that? Why do they deserve it? That should be mine! We look at our neighbor's spouse and think how much better their life would be with me. Disregarding their identity, we objectify them like a piece of property: He should be mine; I should have her!

So it is with all the trinkets of our human existence. We don't merely want to keep up with the Joneses, we covet what is theirs. We don't celebrate what they have for their sake but become envious even jealous of them. We are blinded to see our neighbor as we should, in love, but instead see them through the lens of what they have.

So insidious is the sin of coveting that it can distort our view of everyone around us. We may show regard to our wealthy neighbor with the mansion and disregard the needy. We may brag about the man with a “trophy wife” while ignoring the widow. There is a long list of those who wish to dine with the wealthy, but who will notice the one who serves?

If you don't think your coveting affects your neighbor, you are deceived. Moses advised Israel, “be sure your sin will find you out” (Num. 32:23), and so it is with the secret sin of coveting. You just think it's a secret.

Coveting and Our God

When David confessed his adultery and murder, he did not begin with Bathsheba or her late husband, he began with God: “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (Ps. 51:4). This is, of course, true of all sin, but coveting is especially revealing. God says, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3), but when we covet, we put our sinful desire before God. God says, “You shall not make for yourself [an idol]” (Ex. 20:4), but when we covet, we make a god out of our desires. We could walk through the other commandments and find the same. In fact, as one commentator puts it, “The command not to covet is actually the practical summation and heart-level culmination of the other nine commandments” (DeYoung, 161). Adultery doesn't happen spontaneously but follows coveting after someone else's spouse. Stealing doesn't happen by accident but follows coveting something that belongs to someone else.

Of course, as a sin, coveting is an offense to God, but consider what we are saying to God when we covet: “God, what you have given me is not good enough. God, you have not given me what

The Thief of Contentment

you should have. God, you have not given me everything you could have.” Sound familiar? Our sin makes false accusations of God, untruths as old as the Fall.

These lies of the heart lead to a distrust of God and his providence, which extends beyond what our neighbor has to the circumstances of life. We may not covet our neighbor’s house, but we want to live his life. We may not covet our neighbor’s things, but we want her circumstances.

When we covet, we are believing the ancient lie about who God is and how he loves us. So powerful is this lie that it requires an intentional response: We fight against this lie with the truth and love of God, in other words the gospel. For, it is for coveters like you and me that “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). And, while our hearts sought to be satisfied in everything else but God, he saved us by his grace through faith in Christ.

By God’s grace, we see coveting for what it is: an affront to our holy God and heavenly Father. As we grow in his grace, maturing by looking to his provision and being satisfied in him, we enjoy not covetousness but contentment. It is the content Christian who can sing:

Whate’er my God ordains is right:
his holy will abideth;
I will be still whate’er he doth,
and follow where he guideth.
He is my God; though dark my road,
he holds me that I shall not fall:
wherefore to him I leave it all.

Whate’er my God ordains is right:
he never will deceive me;
he leads me by the proper path;
I know he will not leave me.
I take, content, what he hath sent;
His hand can turn my griefs away,
And patiently I wait his day.²

The writer of Hebrews reminds us to be content with what we have. Why? Because our Lord has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we can say confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper, I will not fear; what can man do to me?’” (Heb. 13:5-6).

Coveting and Our Contentment

If lust is adultery of the heart and hatred is murder of the heart, then coveting is theft of the heart. The primary difference is that we are not only the thief but also the victim. Coveting robs our contentment.

² “Whate’er My God Ordains Is Right,” in *Trinity Hymnal* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 108.

The Thief of Contentment

Yet, our sinful flesh leads us to think differently. Whether it be our neighbor's house, spouse, things, or circumstances, we think that once we have the object of our desire then we will be content. This is not only a lie, it is a breeding ground for ongoing discontentment.

Contentment has never been nor ever will be found in coveting, but in only Christ. Contentment starts with a new heart, transformed by the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ. But Christian contentment is not instantaneous upon conversion. It must be learned. The Apostle Paul confessed, "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" (Phil. 4:11-13). Contentment didn't come naturally for Paul. He had to *learn* it, as do we.

Our flesh screams, "You will only be content when you get what you want." But Scripture reveals that in Christ contentment is found in being satisfied with God. Rightly does our catechism teach us that our "chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever" (WSC Q. 1). The content Christian is the one who is satisfied that God is glorified.

As we learn this, we can look at all that is our neighbor's and be content with, what our catechism calls, "a right and charitable frame of spirit" (WSC Q. 80). We can be genuinely happy for our neighbor's sake, because we trust the providence of God. And we can be content with our own lot, knowing "we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out..." (1 Tim. 6:7). But we can glorify God and enjoy him forever, rejoicing:

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,
thou mine inheritance, now and always:
thou and thou only, first in my heart,
High King of heaven, my treasure thou art.³

³ "Be Thou My Vision," in *Trinity Hymnal* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 642.