

Exodus 20:17 The challenge of contentment

Some of these 10 commandments are harder to get around than others. Imagine thinking through them as a **check-list**.

No other gods ... tick! ... the only **plaques on the walls** at home mention Jesus

No idols ... tick! ... only **garden gnomes**, no statues of Buddha lurking in the undergrowth

God's name ... tick! ... trained myself out of saying even just O M G

God's day ... tick! ... got myself a perfect job that will never call me in on a **Sunday**

Honouring parents ... tick! ... my computer always reminds me to send them **birthday cards** in good time.

Murder ... tick! ... no corpses hidden underneath the **garden gnomes**.

Adultery ... tick! ... always wear my **wedding ring**.

Theft ... tick! ... check the **garage**, nothing dodgy stashed there!

False witness ... well, *mostly* tick! ... only those unavoidable **white lies**

Covet ... funny old word, really, isn't it? What does it really mean?

I think you could probably say that this is the only one of the ten that is exclusively internal. All of the others have *implications* in the internal world of our thoughts and desires and inclinations. But you can see theft or murder or idols.

You'll quite possibly remember that Jesus explained that we have to take those literals and think more broadly, inwardly. There is what you might call "heart murder", too, just for example.

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgement; ..."

(Matthew 5:21-22)

But coveting is something that is exclusively hidden. It is an inward thing. We can covet, and leave no outward sign at all. And perhaps because of that, this final commandment is worked through in greater detail for us.

“You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbour's.”

(Exodus 20:17)

There are some specifics given, but also a clear indication that we are to join the dots ourselves, we are to think more broadly about this. There is not just a specific list of things; there is an **anything** included in the wording.

And it's interesting when we consider just when this particular commandment - along with all the others - is given. Most of the first half of the book of Exodus is about the lead-up to *the Exodus* itself, over a period of nearly a century. It's only a few months, from what we can tell, since God intervened and rescued his people from slavery under the Egyptians. It's recent enough to be the obvious backdrop of the commandments.

And God spoke all these words, saying, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. “You shall ...”

(Exodus 20:1-3)

Big point there: these commandments are not given so that we can qualify for God to rescue us if we keep them well enough. It's entirely the other way around: they are given to people who have *already* been rescued. This is about how the Israelites are to *respond* to being saved. This is about how they are to live *as saved people*.

But this commandment is given at a time when *all* of these people are pretty much desert nomads. They haven't had any time to build up homes and herds and property. On their last night in Egypt, they only had time to do the Passover thing, and grab what they could carry, before they were out the door and heading for the showdown at the Red Sea. Since then it has been a few months at most of moving between different camps in the wilderness, at various times short on food or water. Nobody's rich. They're all vagabonds right now. But God makes this ten commandments instead of nine, because a time will come when their neighbour will have something that is worth coveting. (No, I didn't really mean that!)

And even if the preceding commandments didn't make it clear enough, this one can leave no doubt. Faith in God has to include more than just outward conformity to a set of rules. This one unashamedly demands something *inward*, too. Because God is not just going to occasionally visit his people, like **Ofsted** hitting a school, provoking all kinds of special performances for the inspectors. No, this is about the preparation of a people amongst whom God will be at home.

“And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.”

(Exodus 29:46)

What *doesn't* it ban?
Don't be limited by the literal
Flip it over

- **What *doesn't* it ban?**

“You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbour's.”

(Exodus 20:17)

So here's the commandment again. And you might think that it's rather odd, having said that this is a commandment that deliberately casts its net wide. But I think I should perhaps mention a couple of things that it *doesn't* apply to. First: ever heard this phrase?

“We covet your prayers for ...”

And I have to admit that I just do not understand this one. Oh, I understand what it is basically saying, but I just find it difficult to understand why this phrase could ever have caught on. Of course it simply means, “Please will you pray for ...” I just think, whenever I hear this, *Why on earth ...?*

Why on earth use this strange word? Why not just say it as it is?

I don't mean to just go on a rant about something trivial here, but I really do wonder how this ever became so widely used. First of all, just about the only time anyone will hear the word “coveting” nowadays is in the context of this Commandment. When have you ever heard someone talk about “covetousness” except in some Bible context, and it means something *bad*?

And he said to them, “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)

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.

(Colossians 3:5-6)

Perhaps back when people started saying this, the word “covet” did not have that universally bad connotation. One of the standard Greek words for “desire”, for example, can be good or bad, depending on the kind of thing that is being desired. Maybe it was like that, at one time, with the English word “covet”.

But there's my first quibble - though possibly showing that I'm ill-informed. I just think the word is confusing. But it's also - excuse me if you don't like me using this word this way - just too *precious*.

There are times when Christians *have* to use words that people around us won't understand particularly well. If you talk about the love of God, or the grace of God, or the wrath of God, you might well feel you need to explain them in a bit more detail, and maybe on occasion using words that they are *unfamiliar* with - otherwise people will think you're affirming their cock-eyed notions.

But there are times when Christians use their own special words which, to me at least, just seem like flowery dressing-up of things, rather than just saying it plainly. As if standard words aren't somehow good enough for God, and you need something special and fancy if it's about something to do with faith. I just wonder what that makes us look like to outsiders. Why can't we just say things clearly, in words that they can understand?

So what's wrong with just downright asking - just like you get in the Bible ...

At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison

(Colossians 4:3)

I'm not saying that we should always use the most boring, prosaic words that we can. Paul uses imagery in that request there, a door being opened - but that is an image which is simple and easy to understand, and illuminates how he would like people to pray for him.

But I remember one visiting preacher who used to pause at one point in the service and ask for "the intimations". The first time I heard that - and I had been a Christian for at least a decade - I was flummoxed. He actually was just asking for the notices to be read. But why, oh why, use such a prissy word for it? I just don't see it does us any good to make ourselves seem even more weird than people think we are anyway.

And personally, if you want to use "Thee" and "Thou" in your prayers, out of reverence, I totally respect that choice. But if you're going to do it, please get your other archaic verb forms right. I remember someone, a long time back, coming out with a so-called prophecy: "Yea, I the Lord knoweth". That threw me right away. Because if that was really God speaking, he would have got his King James language correct. And if it wasn't really God speaking using those words ... why dress it up with such archaic language - and *faulty* archaic language, at that!

But look, before we get back on track again, one more point.

This commandment **does not ban desire**, only improper desire. There is nothing wrong with *godly* desire or ambition.

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.

(1 Timothy 3:1)

... I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, ...

(Romans 15:20)

So a question for you, right now. What are *your* ambitions for your life? You surely do have some - even if that is for your life to continue unchanged. You have desires. Everyone has desires. Isn't the question whether those are *good* desires? Are they good enough that you could convert them into a prayer, with no shame? Are you convinced that they are good enough that the Lord Jesus Christ would sign *his* name to them?

- **Don't be limited by the literal**

So, although with this commandment there's a whole set of literal things to apply this to, and they're each worth thinking through individually, we also need to think about the whole process of desires and wants. What is it that prompts them, and then keeps them going? Maybe we need to go right back to the start again. Adam and Eve in the Garden, and, I presume, they start off contented. Don't you think that has to be implied in those closing words in Genesis 1?

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.

(Genesis 1:31)

We really don't have any clear idea how long that situation continued. But we know that that calm contentment was broken. The Serpent comes along and introduces a *something else* into their thought processes. Something *desirable*. There was that fruit that they had been commanded not to eat. God had his reasons, manifestly, and that consideration should have been enough. But ... maybe the man and the woman can be made to ... wobble on that point. By pointing out something that they *don't* have.

"For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

(Genesis 3:5)

And before they swallow the fruit, they swallow the Serpent's deception. Notice the use of that word "desire" in the next verse:

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, ...

(Genesis 3:6)

See how that human faculty for desire has been exploited there. Desire itself is not wrong. There are things that it would be good and right to desire:

Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

(Psalms 73:25)

The desire that Eve had ... “like God, knowing good and evil” ... “to be desired to make one wise” ... that could have been handled differently. That could have been brought to God as a question. A child of God can safely do that, you know.

“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

(Matthew 7:11)

Then, if we were to respond properly, our thinking processes and wills should come into play. We have an idea: this might be good for me to have. But, Lord, is it? And if God says No, then we are to reason: he is a good God, he is my Heavenly Father, he delights to give his children good things. So ... *therefore* ... (see reason being applied here) ... if he says No, he will only do so on the basis of sufficient good reason. So ... *therefore* ... (and now the *will* comes into play) ... no matter what my feelings may say or even shout, I will trust what God has said ... I will trust the God who has said, on this matter, No.

So desires themselves are not necessarily wrong. It is a matter of whether it is a desire for something good or bad. And it is a matter of trust: do we trust what God has put on record?

The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

(Psalms 34:10)

For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favour and honour. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.

(Psalms 84:11)

Folks, do you believe that? Will you trust what is written here? I don't mean, Do you *feel* trust, but will you *put* your trust in what he has said? - a matter of *will*. So even if it goes against your inclinations or preferences, you will

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

(1 Peter 5:6-7)

Because, going back to Psalm 84 again, this should be further encouragement for us:

O LORD of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you!

(Psalms 84:12)

So when it comes back down to those specifics of the commandment ...

“You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbour's.”

(Exodus 20:17)

So what about that **house**? Or should that be **Homes and Gardens** nowadays? Do you watch those programmes that show you **Through the Keyhole**, to see how “celebrities” live? Or those **relocation** programmes, when someone on a very chunky budget looks for a new home in a select, perhaps foreign location?

And the question I think we need to ask ourselves is, *does watching things like that really help us?* Do they feed desires that are appropriate at some level, but become unhelpful if we let them get out of hand? Even things like **Gardeners' World**. Do they lead us to wish that we had enough time or enough money to convert *our* homes and gardens into something like that, too? Or do they lead us to feel inadequate if we don't have the wherewithal to restyle our homes according to the latest fads?

It might be focussed on our neighbour's possessions rather than the actual person themselves, but does it actually target *us*? Do *we* become different people when we indulge this? Do we find ourselves not cultivating taste, or exotic varieties of plants, but cultivating discontent in our own lives?

Of course it is likely to be a more personal sin if it's a question of the neighbour's **wife**. Or, for wives present, your neighbour's *husband*. Have we asked ourselves what it is about that other person that attracts our attention?

Is it perhaps **looks**? In which case ... are we too concerned about outward appearance?

Is it perhaps abilities, skills, personality? Do we perhaps think that life would be so much better if *my* spouse were more like that other person? If only they could **cook** better! If only they could learn to behave better at **parties**! If only ...

And do you see where this 10th commandment therefore has implications elsewhere in that list of Exodus 20? If it's coveting your neighbour's wife ... doesn't

“You shall not commit adultery.”

(Exodus 20:14)

come into view? But just carry on through number 10 now. The next couple of items does sound a bit medieval, with **male servant / female servant**. It was more like part of Hebrew life in subsequent years, I would imagine, because they also pop up in the Sabbath commandment about people you must not make to work.

So what might it be for us, I wonder? Could it be prestige, do you think? A position of responsibility at work, supervising other people? Such that it becomes a coveting not of particular servants, but the desire to have some kind of position of authority and recognition ... success, really.

Folks, do you see how sneakily deadly it can be to compare ourselves too much with others? Not just are regards their possessions, but their positions. To be achievers ... at least as much as your neighbours or other people in your family. To have advanced, to have been recognised and hopefully promoted. Folks, do we inwardly fume if we see other people we regard as less talented than ourselves getting positions that we consider - perhaps even correctly - that we could do better ourselves, that we were in line for? Those things that could possibly be marked out by the next couple of items in the list:

Perhaps next door's livestock isn't a big problem nowadays, but I suppose it could be that **ox** and **donkey** refer to the most recently trending **pets**. I would so have arrived in society if it was known that I had a ... particular breed of cat or dog. But I suspect that we're not looking here at recreational livestock but the ancient equivalent of working machinery. If you were a farmer a few hundred years ago, you might be thinking **shire horse**. More recently, you'd be thinking **tractor** or more something mechanical and more specialised.

For the more typical family nowadays, maybe we should be thinking **cars** or **tools**. Or can we stretch this further, and think in terms of **holidays**? Further again ... do our "circumstances" that we would love to subtly brag about ... or feel disheartened if they don't measure up ... include good obedient children who **work hard at school**, who are happy to **come to church**, and who in time marry and bring home flocks of **grandchildren** for us to spoil and then hand back?

In all of this, I wonder, do we ever stop to think about those people who are not so much stuck lower down the **pecking order**, but live in a lonely coop by themselves, those just longing to have a marriage, or a child?

I wonder if there's even a special Christian object of covetous devotion, too. Oh, I wish I had a *church* like yours, where they ... What do we fill in there?

Where they have a **worship band**.
Where they have a **thriving children's work**
Where they have a **purpose-built building**
Where they have **comfortable chairs**
Where they have **baptisms every month**

Folks, we have to admit it, don't we? We find it very easy to covet. In which case, shouldn't we just once more listen to the words of Jesus, slicing through our pride and pretence?

And he said to them, "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)

Before moving onto the final point, I think I need to pause for a moment. Are there things here that we need to *repent* of, somewhere in this wide area of covetousness?

...

And we might need to stop and think how seriously we're taking Jesus' warning, advice, whatever you want to call it. Just how are we **taking care**? If we're supposed to be **on guard** what measures have we put in place to protect ourselves against being worn down by the advancing tide of *you need, you must have, you are nothing in this world if you don't have ... this and this and this?*

...

And shouldn't we perhaps pause for a moment and repent of those feelings of dull resentment towards those others who have those things that we covet: the foreign holidays, the perfect family, the growing church?

...

And shouldn't we repent, too, of those attitudes towards God that all of this reveals. Our feelings of entitlement contradict his grace. Our feelings of dissatisfaction slight his goodness.

...

Can I make one suggestion about how we need to tackle all of this?

- **Flip it over**

Instead of *capitulating* to covetousness, let us *cultivate* contentment.

It's all too easy to just kid ourselves that we are just responding to our environment and our circumstances. If they were different, we tell ourselves, we would be happier. And in doing that, we do several things.

We locate the problem outside ourselves.

We make ourselves the slaves of those outside circumstances.

We convince ourselves that we are justified in maintaining a sullen resentment towards the people around us - whether living next door to us, or in the pages of the glossy magazine.

And finally, in insisting that we are actually due a rather better deal from “life”, we are actually despising the providence of God. We are saying that he is sleeping on the job. It shouldn't really have been quite like this. I should have got that promotion or that healing, or I should have had at least one sunny day on that supposed “holiday of a lifetime”.

Folks, every time we think we have been short-changed by this life, we are laying an accusation at the feet of God. *You're not watching out for me properly! This isn't what I signed up for!*

And actually, I'd argue that the problem is *not* outside ourselves. It is not primarily about our circumstances, but our response to those circumstances.

Sometimes it *is* down to us, our actions or inactions, and we just have to admit it. If we had studied harder, we might have **passed that exam**. If we had dieted harder, we might be able to **fit into those clothes**. No point in moaning and trying to pass the blame.

But there are plenty enough things beyond our control. We're happy enough when things go our way. But what if not? That's where covetousness needs to give place to contentment.

Listen to the apostle Paul, reflecting on how God *did not* answer his prayers concerning that “thorn in the flesh” (whatever that was), realising that his anguish has actually pushed him back onto what he *knows* about the goodness of God.

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

(2 Corinthians 12:9-10)

And here he is again, writing to the church at Philippi - where we'll be virtually visiting next week - speaking about the changing circumstances of his life.

... 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.

(Philippians 4:11-13)

Writing to Timothy, giving insight into the pastoral situations he might encounter:

But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.

(1 Timothy 6:6-8)

The contrary approach - covetousness instead of contentment - he covers in the next couple of verses:

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)

Folks, because of discontent - because of covetousness - people are forever moving jobs, moving homes, moving between relationships, moving churches, hoping that **round the corner** will be that perfect situation. The next **roll of the dice** will finally give me the break that I need ... that I feel I *deserve*, actually - though goodness knows why.

When instead the answer might be to sit down and take stock of what you have already, if you are in Jesus Christ.

The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.

(Psalms 16:5-6)

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

(Romans 8:31-32)

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." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"

(Hebrews 13:5-6)

Folks, if God has already given us eternal life in Jesus Christ, how can we be dissatisfied? What more could there be, that would be worth our coveting?

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

(2 Thessalonians 2:16-17)