

CHAPTER 13
You Shall Not Covet
promoting contentment in your family

Introduction

Now we come to the last of the Ten Commandments. It forms a suitable conclusion to the instruction given to us as to how we can properly express our love to God. It has been rightly observed that this commandment does not deal with action so much as it does with attitude, making it stand out from the other commandments. All the other commandments, except for the first, deal with an action. At the start and the end of the Decalogue we have commandments that remind us about the attitude we are to have in our daily lives. God is to be primary in our motivations. When people face the different circumstances that come their way in life, they can either be trained to be grumblers against what the Lord has given and express it in covetousness, or contentment. The situations leading to coveting are most often associated with wealth, but can also easily be applied in areas of position, power, privilege. First, this chapter will consider the Bible's treatment of this sin to help understand later applications.

Coveting in the Bible

Covetousness is not a foreign concept in the pages of the Scriptures. There are many different examples where this sin is brought to the forefront. One of the examples can be found in the account of Achan. The people of Israel have come to the borders of Canaan and are about to begin their conquest of the Promised Land. The Lord has led his people out of centuries of slavery in Egypt, led them through the Red Sea on dry land while drowning Pharaoh and his army, rescued them from hunger and thirst in the desert for forty years, parted the Jordan River again allowing his people to cross on dry land, and now they have arrived at the walls of Jericho. The story is well-known: the people march around the city seven days and the walls come tumbling down. However, before the army charges into the exposed city, Joshua commands the people that the city is devoted to destruction. The people are not to take any of it, lest the camp of Israel be subject to God's curse. However, all the silver, gold, bronze and iron are to be taken and placed in the treasury of the Lord.¹ It is a simple command given to a people who owe all their lives to the gracious care of the God who asks it of them. However, as is often the case, what is simple is not necessarily easy.

So it proved for Achan. He took from the devoted things costing his people defeat at Ai. When found out through the use of the lot, listen to his explanation: "...when I saw among the spoil a beautiful cloak from Shinar, and 200 shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing 50 shekels, then I *coveted* them and took them."² In the final analysis, Achan would not give to God what was devoted to him because he wanted it for himself. Instead of having no other Gods before the Lord, Achan preferred serving his appetite for riches rather than his deliverer. At the root of Achan's sin, or any other covetousness for that matter, is a discontentment with the portion God has provided. He coveted wealth that belonged to the Lord, and he acted on it. However, that is only one example of covetousness in the Scriptures.

In the Old Testament we see men like Absalom coveting the throne of his very own father David. David himself coveted the wife of one of his most loyal soldiers, Uriah. He had many wives already and yet he desired Bathsheba above what he already possessed. In the New Testament, Simon the Magician coveted the ability to impart the Holy Spirit to new converts. In all these examples, the essence of the transgression is a discontentment with the provisions God provided. This condition is loudly condemned in the pages of the Old and New Testaments alike. The Ten Commandments clearly prohibit this sin. Likewise Paul's epistles provide us with clear denunciations of coveting. "But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is

¹ Joshua 6:16-19 (ESV).

² Joshua 7:21 (ESV). Emphasis mine.

proper among the saints.”³ It is common to recognize the gravity of sexual immorality and impurity, but covetousness? Nevertheless that is the exact instruction from God’s word. When people scan that catalogue pining for the latest big-screen television, they are committing that which should not even be named among the saints. It is so grievous because, when Christians long for what they do not have, they are in essence laying blame at God’s feet. They are denying the promise that “for those who love God all things work together for good.”⁴ Neglecting the tenth commandment in essence violates the first commandment too. Someone who covets places his desires, ambitions, material comforts and personal position before the joyful acknowledgment of the goodness of God in providing. That is why Ephesians 5:5 can call the person who is covetous an idolater: “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.” The sexually immoral or covetous are idolaters because their desires for possessions rule over them. Parents have the job of preparing and protecting their children from falling into such idolatry. They must ensure they do not prepare them to be grumblers. To help with that task this chapter will give some more clarity on the broader application of this commandment from men who have considered this subject before us.

Good and Necessary Consequence

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* immediately draws attention to the issue of contentment as it relates to coveting. In response to the question of what is required in the tenth commandment the divines respond, “The tenth commandment requireth a full contentment with our own condition, with a right and charitable frame of spirit toward our neighbour, and all that is his.”⁵ The remedy for covetousness is contentment, according to the catechism. That means people must learn true and full contentment to honor God with their obedience. Jeremiah Burroughs, one of the old English puritan preachers of the seventeenth century, clearly explains what it means to be content. He defines contentment as follows: “Contentment is the inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, freely submitting to and taking pleasure in God’s disposal in every condition.”⁶ This definition is so helpful in showing what it means to be content. It is not just a submission to God’s circumstances in life, but actually taking pleasure in them. This definition teaches it does not matter whether God gives riches or poverty, well fed or hungry, strong or weak, healthy or sick. What is significant is remembering that God is the one who is over all things and has placed man where he is. It could be that he has

³ Ephesians 5:3 (ESV).

⁴ Romans 8:28 (ESV).

⁵ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q/A #80.

⁶ Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, (The Banner of Truth Trust, Versa Press Inc.: East Peoria, IL, 1964). 40.

given difficult, or blessed, circumstances, but we can be sure that they are given for his own purposes. People may not understand their situation, but they must learn to rejoice in them nonetheless.

Paul and Silas demonstrated this kind of joy and contentment in the Philippian jail. I am quite certain that these two men did not relish being beaten with rods or being locked up in a Roman dungeon. However, in that very difficult moment they proved themselves to understand the basic dynamic of contentment. They were not left complaining about what had happened to them, but rather in the middle of the night, “Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.”⁷ In the middle of their unfavorable circumstances, they still understood to whom worship was due: the God of heaven and earth, the only true God. When Christians understand this lesson properly it will greatly reduce their grumbling against God in difficult times. Contentment will prevent engaging in things like envy toward others. As the Christian learns contentment he will display it in his attitude toward God and his fellow man. Burroughs again helps clarify the issue: “So this is the art of contentment: not to seek to add to our circumstances, but to subtract from our desires.”⁸ In essence, obedience to the tenth commandment depends on putting to death personal desires and, at the same time, recognizing the goodness of God’s work. God’s work is his will, and Christians must learn to accept his desire as Job did. When all was taken from Job, his response is beautiful: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”⁹ In Job’s response is a recognition that his circumstance comes from the hand of his God. Job trusts the Lord in those moments, in fact he praises him. He can do so because he has understood the root of contentment.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* helps explain what is at the root of covetousness. In covetousness man has thoughts that are contrary to God’s commandments. The *Heidelberg* states the issue this way in response to what is required of the tenth commandment: “That even the smallest inclination or thought contrary to any of God’s commandments never rise in our hearts; but that at all times we hate all sin with our whole heart, and delight in all righteousness.”¹⁰ Again, tying this commandment to the first, the Heidelberg clarifies that sin against the tenth commandment places personal desires ahead of God’s direction. In essence, man places a higher value on the circumstance and temporal compared to God’s will for his life. That is Achan’s sin, the root of Absalom’s attempted coup of his father’s throne, David’s adultery and murder, and the grumbling against the decrees of God in the church today. When grumbling against God in response to a particular circumstance the creature places his situation on a higher plain than obedience to the Creator. There is much that can be said

⁷ Acts 16:25 (ESV).

⁸ Burroughs, 47.

⁹ Job 1:21 (ESV).

¹⁰ Heidelberg Catechism, Q/A #113.

about how to respond properly to averse circumstances, but that must be left to another book. I simply am seeking to establish the principle being taught in the tenth commandment so parents can recognize it their homes and labor to teach and correct covetousness in their homes.

What Will This Look Like in My Family?

The first challenge for the parent is to learn to recognize the areas of covetousness that appear in all families. They must learn to recognize them in their own and in their children's lives. When parents have identified their own short-comings, the next step is to model and teach their children the biblical requirements. Like has been said so many times before, parents must learn two things. The first is to learn to correct the negative, the actual sin, and the second is to teach the opposite virtue.

Correcting Covetousness

In dealing with the tenth commandment, parents must first make sure their children understand what it means to be covetous. There is the simple definition of covetousness: wanting something that belongs to another. Perhaps parents will need to start there, but beyond a definition, parents will have to actually show their children *they* are guilty of this sin. They may be quick to see the transgressions of their siblings, friends and neighbors. However, it is more significant to teach them their own transgressions against the law of God. When they recognize the sin in themselves they can seek forgiveness and learn to live in the joy and love of obedience.

As is usually the case, the most effective time to address sin and how to deal with it is when you are not in the middle of correcting the sinful behavior. Family worship should not exclusively be used for correcting sin. However, there may be good uses to address prominent family sins at this time. The opportunity to look at God's word and discuss how it applies the tenth commandment is most natural when the word of God open before us already. Whether family worship or some other neutral time is used, it is important to ground any teaching on contentment in the study of the word of God. Jeremiah Burroughs' book *a Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* will be a very helpful aid to any Christian, and also to Christian parents. His grasp of the core issues of what takes place in discontentment, of which covetousness is one example, is very helpful. It is in grumbling that man demonstrates the true condition of his affections. For example, when Israel grumbled even as she was being fed, watered and sustained by the Lord as they wandered in the wilderness, the complaints served as an evidence of their rejection of the beautiful blessings of God for them. Christian parents must help their children see that covetousness is a rejection of God's gracious blessing in their lives. They must help their children see that joy and delight does not rest in the circumstances of this world. They must help their children long for conformity in thought, word and action to the God

who made, redeemed and sustains them. People do not conform God to their desires, as if that were possible, but they conform themselves to God's desires. Burroughs identifies the dynamic that is taking place when anyone seeks to conform God to their own standards. "If I become content by having my desire satisfied, that is only self-love, but when I am contented with the hand of God... that comes from my love to God."¹¹ What Burroughs is saying here is that greed is idolatry because it says, "I have not been given enough." Man becomes the final judge of what is sufficient, not God. And anything that is set up over God as a final authority or goal is an act of idolatry. Like other forms of idolatry, the Lord views this rejection of his care very severely.

Numbers 14 records the account of Israel's refusal to enter the Promised Land when Israel was encamped at Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran. Twelve spies were sent out, one from each tribe. Among them were Caleb and Joshua. After forty days of spying out the land the men returned with some of the produce of the land of Canaan. However, along with these trophies ten spies also came with a report of the might of the people of the land. Despite the promises of God to the contrary, they were convinced the Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites and other Canaanites were sure to defeat them. They cried out against the Lord and sought a leader to take them back to the good old days in Egypt when they were enslaved and forced to bake bricks without straw. I do not think there is a clearer example of covetousness in the Bible. For the people of Israel, the grass was always greener on the other side of the proverbial fence. When they were in Egypt they wanted the freedom of other nations. When they had the freedom of other nations, they wanted deliverance from a perceived military inadequacy. The core issue, of course, is a lack of faith in the promise of God, and a lack contentment with his provisions. In the final analysis they have other God's before him. God promised Abraham the land of Canaan, but Israel does not believe he can make good on his promise. That same sin appears today when people complain about the circumstances in which the Lord has placed us. "Many men and women will hearken to the voice of their own base murmuring hearts, who will not hearken to the voice of the Lord."¹² Burroughs makes a profound observation there. People refuse to hear the voice of the Lord in their grumblings. They refuse to hear him say, "My child, this is for your good." In those moments, their hearts are deceived at best, or in full-blown rebellion at worst.

When the Bible speaks of the heart it is speaking of the center of man's desires. In Psalm 38:8, David describes himself, when under the discipline of the Lord, as "feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart." The emotions flow from the heart of man. What Burroughs says, is that when the heart is in a condition of murmuring man is not complaining against his circumstances so much as he is against the one who put these circumstances in place. Covetousness is simply a

¹¹ Burroughs, 131.

¹² Burroughs, 162.

manifestation of that murmuring. Children must understand this truth so parents must teach them. Unfortunately, there are times when what parents permit of their children to disobey God's commandments.

In a Western context, one of the most significant misunderstandings is in the area of needs and wants. What I mean is that, because of the great blessing of wealth given in this cultural context it is easy slip into having a very generous definition of our needs. One dictionary defines the word "needs" as "lack of the means of subsistence." Parents must make sure children understand "needs" biblically. Paul's view of what is needed is a fair bit more austere than the wealthy expectations of today. As he concludes his first letter to Timothy he addresses the issue of contentment and says if a man has "food and clothing, with these we will be content."¹³ Needs are defined as food and clothing by Paul. Marketing professionals around the country are cringing right now because of the narrowness of the definition of "need." Yet, it is not the latest catalogue from your favorite retailer that should define your outlook, but rather the law of God. It is his truth that must be impressed on Christian children.

By way of correction, there are several weaknesses that parents will want to impress on their children. First, they must make sure they protect their little ones against a skewed understanding of what is needed. One of the first ways parents can do this is by limiting possessions. It is not in the quantity of possessions that contentment can be found. However, this sentiment is the most common misunderstanding of how contentment is found. Burroughs says, "The world is infinitely deceived in thinking that contentment lies in having more than we already have."¹⁴ Parents try and make their children happy at birthdays and other special events by giving them more possessions. They give the toy they wanted, the shirt they have been hoping for, the latest gaming system, or that nice board game. Please do not misunderstand what I am saying. I am not saying that giving gifts is wrong and should not be done. However, I am appealing to Christian parents to open their children's toy chest, or look through their closet. They have much more than they could ever truly need. It is an appeal for care. Do not encourage your children toward an addiction to having one more toy, shirt, pair of shoes. At the same time, there are also objective ways children's attitudes can be measured.

I have to confess this area is one where I failed as a father. Hopefully you can learn from my mistakes and prevent it in your children. The mistake actually flowed from something that is good. The Lord has always supplied my wife Lisa and me with sufficient means, but never extravagantly. I have always had employment, but never with lucrative compensation. That meant that, as our family expanded, we learned creative ways to cover our expenses. For example, Lisa is a yard sale expert, suc-

¹³ 1 Timothy 6:8 (ESV).

¹⁴ Burroughs, 45-46.

cessfully clothing our children and furnishing our house almost exclusively by this method, especially in the early years. That means that we were buying books that were \$7 in the store for 50¢. Shirts that would be \$30 in the store my wife was bringing home for \$2. I am convinced that, had she not been such a gifted stewardess of what God gave us, we would not have been able to live as we have. However, as time passed we began to notice an attitude in our children.

A pattern began to develop on Saturday morning. When my wife came back from her yard sale expeditions, the children would gather around her excitedly clamoring to see what mom had bought for them. It was exciting to show them how God provided for them in this practical way. At the same time we began to notice that, because they were often getting new stuff, the level of care they exhibited toward what they already had decreased. We had unintentionally trained them to find satisfaction in getting something new, instead of what they already had. You see, the price of what we purchased may have been low, but we were teaching them that the new stuff is what brought joy. Since then we have sought to address the issue, although I am not sure we have been entirely successful. Parents should limit their children's material expectations. Giving gifts is a wonderful thing to do, but not if it leads to a habit of covetousness. Parents should focus on teaching their children about the joy of giving. They should try to narrow the definition of "need", pointing out instead that these are desires or wants. These corrections are only the first step though.

In addition to curbing wrong behavior this book has taught the significance of promoting the opposite virtue as well. When it comes to the tenth commandment parents must not only address covetousness in all its forms, but must also actively teach their children the importance of Christian contentment.

Instilling Contentment

I will again begin by explaining how contentment can be taught by appealing to the use of family worship. When the family is gathered around God's word parents have a prime opportunity to address their children's consciences from the word of God. When they address them, one thing must be primarily clear in their children's understanding of what is the foundational issue influencing their contentment: an understanding of God's gift to them in salvation.

Jeremiah Burroughs actually holds up a recollection of what is accomplished in salvation as a primary way of overcoming discontentment: "It would be of marvelous help to you to humble your souls when you are in a murmuring condition. If you could but obtain so much liberty of your own spirits as to look back to see what the work of God was in converting you, there is nothing would prevail more than to think of that."¹⁵ What Burroughs is saying is that a proper understanding of the

¹⁵ Burroughs, 143.

liberty from the guilt and dominion of sin guards against an obsession over current circumstances. Whatever Christians may be suffering in the moment is temporary. They are destined for perfect eternal worship, free from pain, suffering, sorrow, sickness and all the other miseries of this life.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”¹⁶

All the grief of this short life will be removed forever and God’s people will dwell in the presence of their Heavenly Father! It is a proper understanding of the depth and beauty of that promise that guides contentment in the circumstances of this life. It is as true today as it was in the Old Testament as it was in the apostolic church of the New Testament.

In family worship, parents can use Paul’s example and his teaching to impress the greatness of God’s grace. Several passages seem especially appropriate to set before families. Parents can start with Acts 16:16-34 and the account of the Philippian jailer previously discussed. In this account Paul and Silas demonstrate their complete peace and joy in belonging to the family of God. After having been beaten with rods and thrown into jail, Paul and Silas are completely content. Not only do they endure the beating without complaining but they also sing hymns to God. In the middle of an agonizing circumstance, not only do they not complain, but they worship God, giving him the praise that is due him as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. When the jailer is restrained from taking his own life notice the first question out of his mouth. In verse 30 he asks, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” It seems that the jailer recognizes the source of their peace and joy to be their salvation. He longs for that same peace and asks how that happens. Paul certainly demonstrates his contentment in his Lord’s promise of forgiveness in his initial behavior in Philippi, but later he also explicitly teaches contentment to this church.

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians he speaks to them of the unsurpassed value of righteousness attained through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul lists all sorts of circumstances that give him a high standing in the Jewish culture of his day. He was properly circumcised, a Benjamite, a zealous Pharisee. Yet all of this has no value to him. He says, “For his [Christ’s] sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—”¹⁷ Paul leaves behind all his past and the things thought to be valuable in this world. He does so in order “that by any means possible I may attain

¹⁶ Revelation 21:3-4 (ESV).

¹⁷ Philippians 3:8b-9 (ESV).

the resurrection from the dead.”¹⁸ The ultimate prize for Paul is to live in eternity with his God. He recognizes the value of God’s covenant promise made to his people. By gaining a proper perspective of the value of God’s gift, the desires and wants of this world certainly fade into the background. As Burroughs teaches, “I am still one in covenant with God, the Lord has made with me an everlasting covenant. As for these things in the world, I see they are but momentary, they are not everlasting.”¹⁹ His perspective is one totally engrossed in the work of the kingdom of God. That is the perspective parents should instill in their children. They can give them the intellectual facts, but then can also teach the positive applications by which they can live their lives to the honor and glory of their covenant Lord.

Although it would be wonderful to be able to teach a concept only once and have children make all the applications, the truth of parenting is somewhat different. Especially in the area of contentment there is a constant battle, not only within the parents themselves but also in their children’s lives. Despite its continuous work, there are some ways parents can encourage contentment within their children.

First, no matter what age a children is, it is healthy to foster a spirit of happiness toward the successes of siblings. This attitude can be cultivated in a variety of ways. For little children, simply have them compliment their siblings when they have finished a task. For example if one of child is struggling to finish a puzzle and finally completes the task the other children can be encouraged to tell the brother or sister what a good job they did. Parents should not allow children to have a “who cares” attitude toward their siblings, but should give them opportunity to rejoice in the good things experienced and given by the Lord. By having them share in the joy of their siblings they are learning to be content in their own circumstances, realizing not every moment of every day is about having attention for themselves.

Second, have the entire family go together to cheer for a sibling participating in a race, play, music recital or other things. When families share in these events, parents should not allow siblings to be disinterested in the activity of their siblings. Parents can have their children cheer their brother or sister on, listen to their musical pieces, and encourage them to give a sincere compliment to the participant after the event is over. Contentment does not come from having their own desires fulfilled, but from seeing others in their service to the Lord.

Third, teach children to serve. This teaching can begin very early on. Today, there seems to be a general aversion to expecting children to participate in the management of the home. However, it is a great practical tool that teaches the child that their life is not about having their own desires met.

¹⁸ Philippians 3:11 (ESV).

¹⁹ Burroughs, 79.

Parents can ask their young child to bring their cups to the counter. If necessary have them drink from plastic cups to avoid the risk of broken glass or porcelain. That is a worthwhile “sacrifice” so children can gain an opportunity to serve. Parents can have a two year old run and get a fresh diaper when that little one is in need of one. When visiting a friend’s house for dinner, have your children help by clearing the table, if they are old enough to do so without risk to your friend’s plates and cups. When children get older, the same can be done at church dinner events. Many churches have Wednesday night services. Parents could easily have their children participate in preparing the meal or doing the dishes, cleaning the eating area, wiping the tables or other needs that arise at the church. There are limitless ways that children can be given opportunities to serve. The problem is usually not with opportunity, but rather in parental recognition of their value. However, when parents fail to act on the chances to serve, they fail to provide children with an opportunity to learn contentment.

Contentment is the antidote to coveting. Contentment is fostered by looking outside of self and toward the salvation of the Lord. Ultimate and lasting contentment will be found only there. This heavenly vision cannot be taught by parents. That is a work of the Holy Spirit. However, parents can lay the framework to help understand the concept of finding joy outside of self. Do your children find joy in the meeting of their needs, making their choices, and filling their time as they please? You may be setting them up for grumbling in almost every circumstance they do not control.

Conclusion

The tenth commandment really does act as a proper book-end for the Ten Commandments. The first tells us to have no other gods before the God of heaven and earth. He is the one who made all things, who provided a Redeemer for his people, and who continues to uphold the world by his own might and providence even today. Because all this is true about God, Christians especially ought to receive with thanks what he has given from his mighty and powerful hand. Covetousness is a rejection of what God has given. In coveting people set their own desires as the hinge on which their contentment will swing. Instead, in learning true Christian contentment, God’s people are trained to look elsewhere for their joy. Instead of looking at the immediate, the Christian’s eyes should look ahead to the promise of Christ’s return, when he will stand before his heavenly Father in glory, joining the saints of all times and all places in perfected worship.

Study Questions

1. Describe the close relationship between coveting and stealing as evidenced in the account of Achan's sin (see page 146). In what way are they the same? In what way different?
2. Read the Jeremiah Burroughs quote on page 148. In what way does our current cultural context conflict with his godly advice?
3. How does distinguishing between “needs” and “wants” help develop contentment in the life of a child?
4. How can the abundance of gifts undermine the biblical call to contentment before the Lord?
5. This chapters gives three ways of encouraging contentment as examples. Using one of these, or one from your own practice describe the process and how it teaches contentment.