

An American businessman docked his yacht in a tiny Mexican village along the coast and purchased some fish from a local fisherman. He complimented the fisherman on the exceptional quality of his fish and asked how long it took him to catch them.

“Not very long,” answered the fisherman.

“Well then, why didn't you stay out longer and catch more?” asked the businessman.

The fisherman explained that his small catch was sufficient to meet his needs and those of his family.

The businessman asked, “But what do you do with the rest of your time?”

“I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, and take a siesta with my wife. In the evenings, I go into the village to see my friends, play the guitar, and sing a few songs. I have a full life.”

The businessman interrupted, “I have an MBA from Harvard and I can help you! You should start by fishing longer every day. You can then sell the extra fish you catch. With the extra revenue, you can buy a bigger boat. With the extra money the bigger boat will bring, you can buy a second one and a third one and so on until you have an entire fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling your fish to a middle man, you can negotiate directly with the processing plants and maybe even open your own plant. You can then leave this little village and move to Mexico City, Los Angeles, or even New York City! From there you can direct your huge enterprise.”

“How long would that take?” asked the fisherman.

“Twenty, perhaps twenty-five years,” replied the businessman.

“And after that?”

“Afterwards? That’s when it gets really interesting,” answered the businessman. “When your business gets really big, you can start selling stocks and make millions!”

“Millions? Really, and after that?”

“After that you’ll be able to retire, live in a tiny village near the coast, sleep late, play with your children, catch a few fish, take siestas with your wife, and spend your evenings drinking and enjoying your friends.”

Well, that went full circle, didn’t it? From the perspective of the businessman – it was all about more – the desire for more, but from the perspective of the fisherman – it’s about being content with what you have and that brings us to the last of the Ten Commandments found in **Exodus 20:17**, where God tells His people:

“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.”

This Commandment is about coveting, **but what does that mean?**

In Hebrew, the word for **covet** is *chamad* and it means to desire greatly, and this word *chamad* is used throughout the Old Testament in both positive and negative ways. For example, the Israelites desired the Promised Land. God’s people are encouraged to desire God’s righteousness, to desire God’s Word, to desire love and joy and peace. These things are good and should be desired in our lives, but our desires can also be misdirected in a negative way, in a wrongful way, and in that sense, coveting occurs when we want something, when we crave something that we do not have and have no right to.

Why would God include coveting in the same list as murder, and adultery, lying and stealing? Because, what we covet, what we desire, what we long for tends to become that thing we pursue. It becomes that which we prize.

I want to share a story with you about a person who strongly desired something that did not belong to him. This story involves two of my most favorite scoundrels in the Old Testament – Ahab and Jezebel. So, if you have your Bible, turn to **1 Kings 21**, and we will begin with **verse 1**.

¹Now it came about after these things that Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard which was in Jezreel beside the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. ²Ahab spoke to Naboth, saying, “Give me your vineyard, that I may have it for a vegetable garden because it is close beside my house, and I will give you a better vineyard than it in its place; if you like, I will give you the price of it in money.” ³But Naboth said to Ahab, “The LORD forbid me that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.” ⁴So Ahab came into his house sullen and vexed

because of the word which Naboth the Jezreelite had spoken to him; for he said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers." And he lay down on his bed and turned away his face and ate no food.

Ahab was a terrible king, he was the worst of the worst, and one day he took special notice of a neighbor's vineyard that was near his summer palace in Jezreel. Ahab wanted the property to extend his vegetable garden, so he approached Naboth, the owner of the vineyard, about selling it. Ahab made an offer on the property, but Naboth could not sell it and went so far as to tell Ahab, "**The LORD forbid me**" and that was a good answer. According to **Numbers 36:7**, God would not allow an inheritance to be transferred from tribe to tribe. This property had belonged to his forefathers and it was an inheritance to Naboth. It belonged to the family, it was to be kept in the family, and as a result, the vineyard could not be sold. That was God's will, and Naboth was being obedient to God.

Well, I suspect King Ahab wasn't used to being turned down like that, so he did what came natural to him. Ahab went to his bed, curled up in a fetal position, refused to eat, and pouted like a little child because he did not get what he wanted – but help is on the way. Let's continue with **verse 5**.

⁵ *But Jezebel his wife came to him and said to him, "How is it that your spirit is so sullen that you are not eating food?"* ⁶ *So he said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, 'Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if it pleases you, I will give you a vineyard in its place.' But he said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'"* ⁷ *Jezebel his wife said to him, "Do you now reign over Israel? Arise, eat bread, and let your heart be joyful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."*

Jezebel went to the bedroom and asked Ahab, "**What's bugging you, honey?**" and he tells her "*Naboth won't sell me his vineyard, but I want it.*"

Jezebel listens to her pouting husband and then she tells him, "*Momma's here, it'll be alright. Don't you worry about that vineyard, I'll show you how to act like a king and deal with someone who won't do what you want them to do. So, go get something to eat, I made some brownies for you.*" She's such an understanding and compassionate lady.

Well, the story continues. Let's pick up with **verse 8**.

⁸ *So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal, and sent letters to the elders and to the nobles who were living with Naboth in his city.*

⁹ Now she wrote in the letters, saying, “Proclaim a fast and seat Naboth at the head of the people; ¹⁰ and seat two worthless men before him, and let them testify against him, saying, ‘You cursed God and the king.’ Then take him out and stone him to death.”

¹¹ So the men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them, just as it was written in the letters which she had sent them. ¹² They proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the people. ¹³ Then the two worthless men came in and sat before him; and the worthless men testified against him, even against Naboth, before the people, saying, “Naboth cursed God and the king.” So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death with stones. ¹⁴ Then they sent word to Jezebel, saying, “Naboth has been stoned and is dead.”

We learn that Jezebel was a very wicked woman who concocted a murderous plan to steal Naboth’s property, and we also learn that the leaders of Jezreel were corrupt by going along with her plan to set Naboth up. She paid two people to falsely accuse Naboth, claiming that he cursed God and the king, and before the day was done, Naboth was stoned to death for blasphemy.

That brings up an observation. Coveting – the strong desire for more, the desire to have what does not belong to us can lead us to break the other commandments. For example, in this case, King Ahab’s coveting led to bearing false witness, it led to murder, and it led to stealing. This tenth Commandment is the one commandment that can cause you to break the other nine. Let’s continue with **verse 15**.

¹⁵ When Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, “Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth, the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead.” ¹⁶ When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab arose to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

When the deed was done, King Ahab took possession of the vineyard to extend his vegetable garden. He got what he wanted, he got what he thought would bring him happiness, but he also got more than he bargained for.

Not long after this, King Ahab was confronted by the prophet Elijah and he told Ahab that both he and Jezebel would die terrible deaths, complete disaster would fall upon his family, and his dynasty would come to an end – and later that’s

exactly what happened. Ahab lost much more than he ever gained from coveting – yes, he got that vineyard, but he lost his life and everything else.

“Do not covet.” That’s the tenth Commandment from God – it’s focus is on the longing for things that do not belong to us, and if you noticed this Commandment is different from the other Commandments.

The fruit of the other nine Commandments involve some type of outward conduct or behavior, but not the tenth Commandment. Right off the bat, it goes right to the heart – it goes to our inward thoughts, our feelings, our desires.

“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.”

I said earlier that what we covet, what we desire, tends to become that thing we pursue and prize. Now, you might be saying to yourself, *“Well, I don’t want my neighbor’s house, and I surely don’t want his wife. Trust me, one wife is more than enough. No one I know has a servant and I don’t need one, and quite frankly, I wouldn’t know what to do with an ox or a donkey. So, this Commandment doesn’t seem to apply to me.”* **Are you sure?**

The tenth Commandment is written for unhappy people, for frustrated people who always want more, who think to themselves *“If I only had that, I would be happy.”* *“If only I had what they had, I would be satisfied”* – and those are the kinds of thoughts that bring this tenth Commandment a little closer home.

For example, men, you may not desire your neighbor’s wife, but have you ever thought to yourself, **“If only my wife was more like her, I’d be a happy man?”** and please don’t answer that because I don’t want to revisit the “You shall not murder” commandment with your wives. But, ladies, the same goes for you as well – *“If only my husband was more like that man.”*

What about servants? None of us have servants, but how about those things which are made to serve us. Those new appliances you saw in your friend’s kitchen that you just have to have, or that new car in your neighbor’s driveway that you surely can’t afford, but you just can’t seem to live without.

What about your neighbor’s ox or donkey? In those days, these animals were important to make a living – they couldn’t do their jobs and bring in the crops

without them. Haven't you wanted another person's income, desiring another person's job or career?

And for those of you who think this Commandment still does not apply to you, God throws in the word **"anything"** just in case you get too self-righteous.

Did you notice our passage uses the word **"neighbor"** three times? That suggests we tend long for those things that are close to home – things we see on a regular basis. In other words, it doesn't matter to me who has what in Seattle, but that shiny new truck in the church parking lot with all the bells and whistles – well that's another story. It's calling my name, and I'm wondering why he gets a new truck but I don't get a new truck. **Don't I deserve a new truck?** I mean all those commercials say I do. *"Lord, the Bible says 'You are my Provider, but it seems to me that are you withholding something from me that I would enjoy. That doesn't seem fair Lord.'"* **See how quickly my thoughts go down that dark rabbit trail?**

We are all guilty of coveting, longing for something we don't have, telling ourselves *"If only I had this, if only I had that, I would be happy and satisfied,"* when the truth of the matter seems – the more we get, the more we want.

*Two old friends met each other on the street one day. One looked sad and almost on the verge of tears. His friend asked, **"What has happened to you, my old friend?"***

The sad fellow said, "Let me tell you. Three weeks ago, my uncle died and left me forty thousand dollars."

"That's a lot of money," said his friend.

"But you see," the sad man continued, "two weeks ago, a cousin I never knew died, and left me eighty-five thousand dollars, free and clear."

The friend replied, "That sounds like you have been very blessed."

"You don't understand!" the sad fellow interrupted. "Last week my great-aunt passed away. I inherited almost a quarter of a million from her."

*The friend was really confused and said, **"Then, why are you so sad?"***

"This week I didn't get anything!"

Why do we covet what we do not have?

Just like the other Commandments, the fruit has a root – there is something that goes much deeper, and I think that root of coveting is discontentment – being dissatisfied with what we have, being dissatisfied with our circumstances – always wanting more, always wanting better. Now, it's not wrong to have goals and hopes and dreams that drive us and cause us to strive for a better life and a better future – that's understandable, that's natural, but there is a wrongful kind of discontentment that eats at us, it robs us of our joy, it distorts our outlook on life where everything is seen in a negative light, it leads us to acquire more things we don't need until the next new and improved version comes along, and most unfortunately, discontentment tells us that God has not provided what we need, and therefore, He cannot be trusted.

The Bible has a lot to say on this subject of coveting and the opposite of coveting which is contentment, and I want to focus on one such passage found in the book of Hebrews. If you have your Bible, turn to **Hebrews 13:5**. We are told,

Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you."

The last portion of that verse we are very familiar with. The Lord promises ***"I will never leave you nor forsake you."*** We know that portion of the verse very well, but what we may not appreciate is the context in which it is found.

In context, what we are presented with is a contrast – a contrast between coveting, referred to as ***the love of money*** – which is a form of coveting – being contrasted with contentment – being satisfied and pleased with what God has already given us. This verse is a contrast between coveting and contentment, which then begs the question: **How does this contrast relate to the promise of the Lord's presence in our lives?**

In that verse, that little word ***"for"*** introduces us to the reason why we don't have to covet. It introduces us to the reason for contentment. The grounds for our contentment is the promise of God's presence. Knowing that He is always near, knowing that He cares, knowing that we matter to Him is the reason for our contentment. Contentment does not come from more things – contentment comes from a Person – the Lord Jesus Christ, and one pastor said, ***"If He isn't enough, then we will never have enough."*** So true. If Jesus isn't enough for us – yes, we

might store up many treasures in this life, but we will always be in want, waiting for the next best thing, dooming ourselves to a life of frustration and emptiness.

So, where do we go from here? How do we overcome the strong desire for more? There are probably several answers to that question, but here are a few to consider.

First, we need to realize that the Lord who is present with us is good and He knows what is best for us. He knows our needs, He cares for us, and we matter to Him – and that fact was proved on an old rugged cross. We can trust Him.

I think it's also important to be reminded that Lord who is present with us just so happens to be the real owner of all things – we are just stewards of what He owns, and if He gives us riches, we can thank Him, and as good stewards, we can use these riches to be generous to others. Riches are not about increasing our standard of living, instead they are for increasing our standard of giving. If the Lord takes our riches away, that's okay too because He hasn't abandoned us. Again, contentment comes from a Person – the Lord Jesus Christ, and we can be content with Him.

And lastly, the Lord who is present with us has a heavenly inheritance waiting for us as His children. Nothing on this earth will last and our stuff does not come with us. There are no U-Haul trailers in funeral processions. We take nothing with us and that's why we don't store up treasures on earth, but rather we send them on ahead to heaven by being good stewards – by doing His will with what He has provided to us.

A businessman and his friends were talking and laughing together, recalling their successes and bragging about the luxuries they possessed, and then the businessman told his friends about his poverty as a child.

He said that as a child, someone had given him a big coin. To have a coin was rare for children back then, and his little sister often begged to hold it. The businessman laughed over the memory of all the chores he got his little sister to do for him just for the chance to hold that coin.

He told of a day when she minded the cows all day long just for the privilege of holding the coin, only to have to give it up at the end of the day. All of the men laughed at the silliness and the foolishness of the sister to hold the coin.

Just then, one man, who had stopped laughing, reminded them all that they were doing the exact same thing as the little sister. All of their labor and all of their business deals was for the opportunity of holding onto a few possessions for a short time, because at the end of the day, at the end of this life, they would have to give it all up just like the little sister gave up the coin.

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