

“con.tent.ment”

Exodus 20:17; Responsive Reading, “Contentment”¹

Once upon a time there lived a lovely little Princess named Snow White. Her vain and wicked Stepmother the Queen feared that someday, Snow White’s beauty would surpass her own. So she dressed the little Princess in rags and forced her to work as a scullery maid. Each day the vain Queen asked her Magic Mirror, “Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, who is the fairest one of all?” And as long as the Mirror answered, “You are the fairest one of all,” Snow White was safe from the Queen’s cruel jealousy.

That’s a fairy tale, of course, taken from Walt Disney’s history-making animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*,² but there are plenty of similar examples in real life. Here’s one of them: “*When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with timbrels and lyres. As they danced, they sang: ‘Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.’*”

“*Saul was very angry; this refrain displeased him greatly. ‘They have credited David with tens of thousands,’ he thought, ‘but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?’ And from that time on Saul kept a close eye on David*” (1 Samuel 18:6-9).

Saul was jealous for power and glory, not for the beauty the wicked Queen desired, but his jealousy had the same effect. Saul’s jealousy of David consumed the rest of his life, and in the end it destroyed him.

The Big Idea here has to do with desiring something that isn’t ours to have, and that’s how the whole human story began, after all. Adam and Eve chose to take something that wasn’t theirs to have, and they plunged all humankind into a misery that continues to this very moment (Genesis 3).

In Numbers 12, Miriam and Aaron were jealous of their brother Moses’ privileged relationship with God. They wanted for themselves what God had chosen to give to Moses, and it cost them dearly.

In 2 Samuel 13, King David’s son Amnon desired something that wasn’t his to have and violated his sister, Tamar, an act that ruined her life and ended his own.

In 1 Kings 21, King Ahab wanted Naboth’s vineyard, and Queen Jezebel had Naboth murdered to get it . . . for which she paid with her life, too.

All these examples bring us to the Tenth and last Commandment: “*Do not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor*” (Exodus 20:17).

You may remember that our study of the Eighth Commandment made it clear that the Tenth Commandment can’t be forbidding the acquisition of property as a matter of principle. What the Tenth Commandment forbids is the desire for something we have no right to have; and deeper still, the Tenth Commandment has much to tell us about the idea of *contentment*.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 23, 2015.

² Walt Disney Productions, 1937.

Comedian Grady Nutt used to joke about being a student at a small Christian college that was located “five miles from any known sin.” “The school had three rules,” Grady said. “You won’t smoke, you won’t drink, and you won’t *want to*, either. I was dismissed for wanting to!” Wanting to is where it all begins, and some have gone so far as to suggest that the violation of the Tenth Commandment must necessarily precede the violation of any of the other nine.

As Jesus would later say much more clearly, this final Commandment highlights the essential truth that good and evil begin within. This last Commandment takes us from the physical world into that secret place where all good and all evil begin—in our hearts and minds.

And the truth is that the first and last Commandments are the most difficult by far. They are like bookends, a spiritual framework that enables obedience to the inner eight.³ Controlling behavior, as required by Commandments 2-9, is not terribly difficult; controlling our desires, as required by Commandments 1 and 10, is much harder. We can stop ourselves from stealing, but it’s a different thing to stop wanting to steal. We can keep from hitting someone, but it’s harder to avoid wanting to hit him.

Now it’s not earnest desire in itself that is forbidden here. What is forbidden is earnestly desiring our neighbor’s property or his wife or her husband. It isn’t necessarily wrong to desire a home or a mate. But it’s wrong to want to take someone or something away from someone else.

The core and the root of covetousness is the idea that getting something we don’t have will make us happy. But if we’re paying attention at all, we already know that nothing could be farther from the truth. If the possession of things really brought happiness and contentment, then this would be the happiest and most contented age in history, for never was there such material well-being as there is in Western civilization today. But rather than contentment, we’ve ended up with the most anxious and dissatisfied age in history instead.

That’s because coveting is like a child with a new toy. For an hour or two, or a day or two, the toy brings pleasure, but then it’s tossed aside and the desire for “something else” returns unabated. Coveting actually has a lot in common with substance abuse. Addicts need more and more of their drugs to produce the same effect; and eventually things get so bad that they need more and more of their drugs just to feel like they’re “up to zero”; the possibility of pleasure is long gone. In a similar way, when we try to satisfy our desire to possess more and more, our desire grows, like a living and pernicious creature. And it takes increasingly costly things to provide increasingly brief respites from this desire.

Pastor Ron Mehl told a story with which I can identify. Perhaps you can, too. This story illustrates at a much lower and much less painful level what the AshleyMadison.com scandal this week was really all about: “This past year, I’ve been whining around home before Christmas, trying to convince my family to be sensitive to my needs and buy me a certain new briefcase that had my eye on. I was sure that *if I just had that briefcase*, my eyes would cease to wander; I would be a contented man that last. So they did it. They bought it for me. The very one I longed for. I was elated! But . . . just the other day I saw one I like even better. And somehow that took some of the shine off my new briefcase. I felt a little bit like a second-class citizen when I walked through the airport. Once you start coveting, you’re never satisfied.”⁴

³ David Hazony, *The Ten Commandments: How Our Most Ancient Moral Text Can Renew Modern Life* (New York: Scribner, 2010), p. 234.

⁴ Ron Mehl, *The Ten(der) Commandments: Reflections on the Father’s Love* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 1998), p. 228.

The dance that begins with the 8th and 10th Commandments, this dance that balances valuing property and keeping such things within proper limits, becomes accentuated throughout the Bible, finding its final crescendo in the teaching of Jesus. From Creation forward, the Bible affirms that the world and its contents are good things, things that God certainly intends for us to enjoy; yet the other side of the dance is that it's crucial to avoid making that enjoyment our final goal.⁵

In the New Testament, the same Jesus who miraculously turned water to wine and multiplied food to feed thousands reminded us that we do not “*live by bread alone.*” The same Jesus who taught us to pray, “*Give us today our daily bread*” warned us not to worry about what we will eat or drink.⁶ We who follow Jesus follow the fascinating, challenging, and wondrous path that runs between being “so heavenly-minded that we’re no earthly good” on the one hand and between being “so earthly-minded that we’re no heavenly good” on the other.

And this brings us back to the idea of “contentment.” Paul wrote that he had “**learned to be content whatever the circumstances**” (Philippians 4:11), and that tells statement us that, while contentment is something that has to be learned, it is indeed possible to learn it.

Has it ever occurred to you that there is an army of sophisticated marketers who are spending billions of dollars and working around the clock with the single goal of making you unhappy and dissatisfied with what you have? Sadly, much of our economy is built solidly on the psychology of dis-content, and at its root, discontent is really a theological issue. To be discontent is to tell God, “What I have isn’t enough. What you have provided is less than what I need, want, and deserve.”⁷

Although the world tells us in a hundred ways every day, “Happiness waits at the Stuff Mart! All you need is lots more stuff!” the truth of the matter is that contentment comes from within, and external circumstances have very little to do with it. A famous American, whom you’d recognize if I could remember his name, recently said in an interview that “I wish everyone could make ten million dollars so that they could see that this isn’t it.”

As we’ve noted again and again, God gave us the Ten Commandments in order to make our lives better, more free, and more joyful (John 10:10). The Tenth Commandment forbids coveting because coveting hurts us. God wants us to have treasure, but God also warns us that we’re in danger of having the wealth of this world deceive us into eternal poverty.

And the really important thing about all this isn’t our treasure itself, but what our treasure does to our hearts. Coveting sucks us down into a whirlpool of frustration in which our every desire, our every move, and our every happiness are controlled by the condition of the stock market and the state of our bank accounts. Coveting is the very antithesis of contentment.

In His famous Parable of the Soils, Jesus was talking about coveting when He explained what He meant by the “thorny ground”: “*The thorny ground represents those who hear and accept the Good News, but all too quickly **the message is crowded out by the cares of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for nice things**, so no crop is produced*” (Mark 4:18-19).

So let me suggest three principles that may be helpful in our struggle to follow Commandment Number Ten. The first principle is this: **temporary holdings do not constitute**

⁵ Joy Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), p. 121.

⁶ John 2:1-12; Matthew 14:13-21, 15:29-38, 6:11, 31-33; Davidman, p. 122.

⁷ Mehl, 235, 230.

real riches. No person is rich to whom the grave brings bankruptcy. Neither is that person a fool who releases that which cannot be kept in order to gain that which cannot be lost.

When you and I dream about the future, what we typically do is to dream in material, self-indulgent terms: a bigger house, a new car, a flashy ski boat, a swimming pool, or a cruise. We want to win the lottery. But one of Ron Mehl's friends turned all that on its head when he described his dream like this: "What I really long for doesn't have much to do with money. *What I want is a family that loves the Lord and walks with God. What I really want for my children is a heart that is faithful to Christ, no matter what their finances or circumstances.*"⁸

My friends, the treasures of this world, wonderful as they are, are always being eaten by the moths of depreciation, eroded by the rust of inflation, and stolen by the thousands of varieties of thieves who inhabit this earth (a thief skimmed one of my credit cards just this week). Ecclesiastes reminds us that you and I are going to come to the end of our lives just as naked and empty-handed as on the day we were born (5:15). When we die, our heirs will wonder what we've left behind; but the angel who bends over our dying form will be asking about what we've sent on ahead.

And that brings us to the second principle: **eternal investments are the ones that matter.** God wants us to have treasure. That's been the point all along. The wealth of this world easily deceives us into eternal poverty; but treasure can also anchor our souls and pull us into Glory if it's invested in heaven (Hebrews 6:19). Investing in spiritual treasure raises the focus of our vision to eternal things and is the only source of the peace and contentment for which our hearts long.

Joy Davidman, wife of C. S. Lewis, wrote that "If just for one moment we forget the self and its desires and its rights, and give a scrap of our lives away, in return we get an incredible 'candle in the heart,' just for a moment. But what if the candle never went out, but spread and strengthened and filled your whole consciousness forever? And what new and miraculous life might you hope to get, if you ever managed to give your life away entirely? *That's what Jesus told us to try for – for the full blaze of God's love, for inexpressible delight of soul and body, for joy beyond all joys. This is what we were put into the world to find; and the world itself, seen clearly, exists primarily to help us find it, as a hothouse to nurse our growing spirits along until they're strong enough for the unimaginable splendors of heaven.*"⁹ Eternal investments are the ones that matter.

The third principle is this: **we always look after our investments.** Jesus spoke the truth when He said that "*Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be*" (Matthew 6:19-24). The Way of Jesus, if we ever truly embrace it through joyful surrender to God, will not only enable us to obey the Ten Commandments, but will enable us to enjoy doing it, as well. The Way of Jesus will bring us out of the noise and darkness and helplessness and trouble that we call "the world" and into the full Light of God's Glory. This is the Light we remember from our childhood dreams and that we have glimpsed through music and art and the ecstasies of love. This is the Light we've known through the brief heart glow that follows occasions of genuinely selfless kindness and sacrifice.

And this is the Light which, in our heart of hearts, we desire more than money or sex or power or anything else under the sun. I'm afraid we are all thieves who have stolen the Self that was meant for God and tried to keep it for ourselves alone. But if we release our Selves to Him,

⁸ Mehl, 230-231.

⁹ Davidman, p. 130.

we will discover what Jesus was talking about when He told us that “*whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it*” (Luke 9:24).¹⁰

My friends, the way we get rid of the covetous greed that destroys our lives and the desire for more stuff that shrivels our souls is to meet and to fall in love with Someone who changes our hearts and redirects our love. His name is Jesus, and He alone can set us free.

¹⁰ Davidman, p. 139.

con-tent-ment

Leader: *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21).*

People: ***“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15).***

Leader: *Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income (Ecclesiastes 5:10).*

People: ***But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that (1 Timothy 6:6-8).***

Leader: *Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs (1 Timothy 6:9-10).*

People: ***I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength (Philippians 4:11-13).***

Leader: *The LORD is my shepherd. I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake (Psalm 23:1-3).*

People: ***So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18).***

Leader: The Word of God for the People of God.

People: **Thanks be to God!**