



## Is Wanting What Others Have Really That Bad?

**Exodus 20:17:** (NASB) *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.*



The Ten Commandments are iconic. They represent a distilled view of what God wants the human race to follow in daily life. They are concise, firm and explicit. Someone once said that God gave the Commandments as the Ten Commandments, not the Ten Suggestions. The last of these Commandments is the command to not covet. So, how do we here in the 21st century understand what this really means? After all, is not most of our life these days built around the idea of ME, what I want and why I should have it? How does this idea of NOT coveting even stand a chance in our day?

**Covet:** Strong's #2530 *chamad* (khaw-mad'); to delight in

By definition, to covet can be a very positive thing or a very negative thing. Here is a positive example from the Old Testament...**God literally planted the idea of "coveting" in the Garden!** **Genesis 2:9:** God built humanity to have a deep desire for what they had been physically given - perfect life and perfect sustenance.

God also built humanity to have a deep desire for what he had been spiritually given - the guidance and laws of God: **Psalms 19:7-10:** Here is a *negative* example of coveting in the Old Testament: **Proverbs 6:23-26:** We have been given strong desire as God's creation and that is a good thing. But as with everything else good that God planted into humanity, sin distorts and confuses the honor and value of desire. Our society has been built around coveting - wanting something - advertisers are EXPERT at feeding the want!

**Theme Scripture:** **Exodus 20:17:** (Do not take away from what your neighbor has so you can have it.) It is not the practice of coveting that is commanded against here - it is the *object* of our coveting that commands our attention and what we are willing to do about that object. We have to be on alert to see what is driving our desires and if they are appropriate or not.

**What about this subject in the New Testament?** **Romans 13:9:** (KJV) *For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou **shalt <1937> not covet <1937>**; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.*

This verse gives us a clear Old Testament and New Testament connection. It uses a very specific Greek word to replace the Old Testament Hebrew word.

**Covet:** Strong's #1937 *epithumeo*; to set the heart upon, i.e. long for (rightfully or otherwise)

**This next verse also mentions coveting, though it uses a different word:** **1 Corinthians 12:31:** (KJV) *But **covet earnestly <2206>** the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way.*

**Covet earnestly:** Strong's #2206 *zeloo* (dzay-lo'-o); to have warmth of feeling for or against; to burn with zeal; to be heated or to boil with envy, hatred, anger; in a good sense - to be zealous in the pursuit of good

The Corinthian church was using the miraculous gifts of the Spirit, like speaking in tongues, in inappropriate ways. It created chaos in their worship services so the Apostle Paul was chastising them and explaining they need to deeply desire the "best" gifts. We as Christians should have deep desire...but are they proper desires? (We believe the gifts given to the early Christian church are no longer valid, as they were given to spread the Gospel before the Gospel was in written form. **For more information on this important topic, please see the program from May 24, 2015, "Should Christians Speak in Tongues?" Also, May 13, 2012, "How Does the Holy Spirit Work?"**)

These New Testament words are more "colorful" in a way - they seem to be more deeply filled with emotion, and that emotion can either have a very negative or positive impact on our lives.

**Negative impact examples:** **Matthew 5:28:** A lot of biblical examples involve human sexuality. Sexuality must be put into check in so many different ways and circumstances. It is far more difficult now than ever before.

**Acts 7:9:** Joseph's brothers wanted the attention Joseph was getting. This is a classic example of desire gone bad.



**Positive impact examples:** Matthew 13:17: We have the opportunity to hear what the people of old wanted to know so badly!

1 Timothy 3:1: Serving others in a pastoral way comes with sacrifice, time, energy - giving of yourself for others. The context explains the type of person who the congregation should elect into that position of leadership. It is a lot of responsibility and takes deep humility. Too often in Christianity, people desire the office of pastor for selfish reasons.

We can actually focus our coveting/desire with relative clarity if we lay out the structure of the Ten Commandments as the foundation for that focus:

**Observations:**

- The first four commandments guide our relationship with the Almighty.
- The First Commandment is "internal instruction;" fulfilled within our heart and mind.
- The next three are God-related "external instructions;" their fulfillment can be seen.
- The second six guide our relationship with our human family.
- Commandments Five through Nine are external action instructions; their fulfillment can be seen.
- The Tenth Commandment is "internal instruction;" fulfilled within our heart and mind.

So, what we have is somewhat of a sandwich effect - surrounding all of our actions are the internal desires of our hearts and minds.

Proverbs 23:7: (NASB) *For as he thinks within himself, so he is...* One way to get rid of something, in this case the sin of coveting, is to replace it with something else that is positive and God-honoring.

**We all desire the peace of God:** Philippians 4:7: (NIV) *And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* We find this by focusing on it and filling our hearts and minds with the word of God and His instructions and inspiration. We ask Him for firm guidance and strength to put these things in place. Focus on what we truly desire. Also, find your joy and fulfillment in helping others.

This builds on the desires of humanity: We can get this, AND this, AND this, AND THIS! The excitement builds up inside us and we can fall off the proper path.

If our hearts are truly set on having no other God before The God, our human desire can then be filtered through that focus so that we do not fall into double-mindedness and deceit.

**If we fall into the category of saying one thing but desiring another, we are not acceptable before God:**

Psalms 55:19-21: (NASB) *<sup>19</sup>God will hear and answer them— even the one who sits enthroned from of old - Selah. With whom there is no change, and who do not fear God. <sup>20</sup>He (the one who does not fear God) has put forth his hands against those who were at peace with Him; he has violated His covenant. <sup>21</sup>His speech was smoother than butter, but his heart was war; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords.*

Jesus showed that violating the last commandment (Thou shalt not covet) is always a result of the violation of the first (Thou shalt have no other gods before Me).

**This is key to putting our desires in the right place:** Matthew 22:34-40: *Love your neighbor as yourself* - this is the culmination of the last five Commandments. You cannot love your neighbor in this way if you are coveting that which is his or hers. Jesus is saying if you are not loving your neighbor as yourself, you are coveting because you are missing the First Commandment - loving the Lord your God. Jesus accused the Pharisees of not being concerned about all of the people they should have been concerned about. Concern over their position of power was more important. **Jesus saw the covetous hearts of those who would judge him, and he sought to give them direction:** Luke 11:37-41: Jesus was telling them the important part was to focus internally on keeping the heart clean.

The defining characteristics of positive versus negative coveting: The OBJECT of your coveting, the CIRCUMSTANCES of your coveting and the REASONS for your coveting.

**Satan, the original coveter:** Isaiah 14:12-14: *I will be like the Most High* - Satan coveted God's position, wanting to replace God with his own authority.



There is a repeated pattern running through the process of covetousness:

The OBSERVATION Stage: Seeing something attractive

The THOUGHT Stage: Holding and personalizing the image of that which is attractive

The RATIONALIZATION Stage: Convincing yourself you "deserve" that which you covet

The ACTION Stage: Turning the inward sin of covetousness into an outward sin of action

**Eve, the first human coveter:** Genesis 3:6: Here is the deviousness of sin: Eve connected the positive desire that God implanted in the Garden with the lying deception of Satan. His temptation was that she would be *like God*, and convincing her there was nothing wrong with that. Eve wanted something she was forbidden to have and took it anyway. **Angels at the time of the Flood:** Genesis 6:1-2: God's own angels followed the lead of Satan and desired what was created out of their reach. They found a way to take it and it was wrong. **Israel's national coveting:** 1 Samuel 8:1-9: Rebellion is a symptom of covetousness. Samuel took the rejection personally, but the people had freedom of choice although it included God's warning. What is the common factor in the four examples of coveting we studied? **ALL VIOLATE THE FIRST COMMANDMENT** - Thou shalt have no other gods before Me! That was put aside and the inappropriate desire grew because that First Commandment no longer drove the coveter. **All examples replaced the divine character and standard of God with the deviant characters and stand-ins of whatever the moment brought.**

**The following text firmly identifies the problem AND clearly points to the solution:**

James 4:1-10: This really disputes the so-called Prosperity Gospel popular today. *You ask and do not receive* - you are asking out of your own wants. We are supposed to want the life God wants for us through Jesus. THAT is the life we should be coveting - my life for God through Jesus. Desires for things can be good if they spur us to do things with integrity and in accordance with the will of God. Remember, just because it is a desire in your heart does not automatically mean God wants it for you. Are you setting up anything or anyone else as "god," and are you following in the footsteps of Christ?

Let us get back to the defining characteristics of positive versus negative coveting by looking again at those Scriptures in James. The object of our coveting in James 4:1 is the negative. James 4:6-7 describes the positive object of our coveting. James 4:1,6-7: (NKJV) *Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your **desires for pleasure** <2237> that war in your members?*

**Desires for pleasure:** Strong's #2237 hedone (hay-don-ay'); from handano (to please); sensual delight; by implication, desire

James explains this is one of the problems with our coveting - it comes from our physical desires. How do we know if our desires are good or bad? *<sup>6</sup>But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. <sup>7</sup>Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.* The solution James gives to counteract these earthly desires is to *submit to God*. This will temper our physical sensuality and whatever it may be driving us towards. *The devil will flee from you* - because he no longer will have a foothold because your focus is on God.

The circumstances of our coveting in James 4:2 are the negative side. But James 4:8-9 show us the positive. James 4:2,8-9: *<sup>2</sup>You **lust** <1937> and do not have. You murder and **covet** <2206> and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask.*

Human desire that is not God-based often never "feels" fulfilled. If we are not asking for the right things in the right way, of course you will not be fulfilled and will always be empty. This could lead to being driven to, and perhaps obsessed with the wrong things.

**What is the solution?** *<sup>8</sup>Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup>Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.*

This describes a profound process. *Draw near to God and He will draw near to you* - this can be done through prayer, by reading God's word, fellowship, in meditation on spiritual things and more. When we draw near to God, by definition we are drawing away from those other things. *Cleanse your hands* - stop doing the sinful things! Clean up your actions! *Purify your hearts* - it is not enough to stop doing the sinful actions. You have to stop being



doubleminded. *Lament, mourn and weep* - be sad and sorry for what you have been doing. Repenting is a part of this. This is the process to get back to God.

The reasons for our coveting in James 4:3,4 show the negative. James 4:10 shows the positive.

James 4:3: *You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures <2237>.* *Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?* You are not getting what you want because you have made it all about you! Being a Christian is NOT all about YOU! It is all about God through Jesus. You are focusing on the wrong thing. **When our focus is on self-fulfillment rather than honoring God, we end up against God!**

James 4:10: *Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.* Make it right with God first. Then, with no other gods before Him, He can begin to work with us and begin to give us the strength to rise above. We are not to covet those things which DO NOT or SHOULD NOT rightfully belong to us!

Our last example of right and wrong desire is very practical. The idea and opportunity for coveting can really take root in the following circumstance: In his first letter to Timothy, the Apostle Paul addresses the servitude that many Christians in the Roman world were then under and the relationship of Christian servants and Christian owners.

1 Timothy 6:1-2: Paul is emphatically stating that anyone who calls themselves a Christian should - in regard to their social standing - be willing to embrace their lowly state of being a slave. If you are a slave in the Roman culture, serve well. Why? So, God and Christianity are respected! The servant would be responsible, have integrity and perform their work in a quality manner. Learn to work within the imperfect system. He goes on to explain that if your master happens to be a Christian, you should be all the more happy to serve because you are blessing and serving believers.

Why doesn't Paul say Christian owners should free their slaves? In those days, that relationship was similar to our employer/employee relationships before there were unions protecting workers. Employers had a stranglehold on employees. Paul is advocating godliness for all parties but especially for those who would likely want to rebel. They were supposed to live according to Christ. Jesus did not try to change the political system of his day. The Apostle Paul was not trying to change the political system of *his* day. We should not be trying to change the political system of our day. Paul's admonition was to be content with what you are given - slave or master. Be responsible and have integrity regardless of your situation. The slaves Paul admonished were in a disadvantaged state in the context of their society and Timothy was told to teach this to everyone.

1 Timothy 6:3-5: (NASB) Do not create an atmosphere where coveting, improper desire, can flourish. We have choices in the type of environment we have around us. We can grow the weeds of sinful covetousness or the fruit of spiritual desire. What are we planting into our environment to bring the type of growth we really want? *Godliness is a means of gain* - godliness is not supposed to be about getting stuff! It is about spiritual growth by following God through Jesus. **Maybe Paul thought of Jesus' sound words when writing the previous texts: Matthew 11:28-30:** Jesus did not say he would take away our difficulties in life. We still carry that which we carry, but we will feel relief if we follow Jesus. **When we covet that which is earthly, we will receive that which destroys: 1 Timothy 6:6-8**

Contentment replaces unfulfilled desire when we entirely focus on godliness in our everyday lives! 1 Timothy 6:9-10: Being rich is not a sin, but if you want to get rich you will fall into temptation by definition. That is one of the reasons Paul is saying it is okay to be in a position of servitude. Use whatever it is you have to glorify God through Christ. Then your desire will be towards pleasing God and not yourself. The 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment is a profound warning! To covet wrongly is to set ourselves up for the trap of obsession and the end of a spiritually destroyed life. We need to desire wisely and spiritually! Desire in a godly fashion.

*So, is wanting what others have really that bad?  
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions...  
Think about it...!*