

Justin Guin

AGAINST COVETING

Exodus 20:17, Deuteronomy 5:21

One Main Thing

Overcoming covetousness requires me to align my desires with the word of God.

Introduction

In Genesis 3, Satan, in the form of a serpent, appears in the biblical narrative. He is described as one who is "crafty," and his shrewdness is immediately on display. As he encounters Adam and Eve, he targets their human frailties in a couple of ways. First, he undermines the authoritative command of God. Notice Satan's question, "Did God actually say?" (v. 1) With God's command in question, he tempts them with something they desired namely to be like God. In Genesis 3:6 Eve saw the food was "good" and the "tree was desired to make one wise." Then, she and Adam take the fruit, eat it, and transgress God's command. Why? Their desire was not

in line with the will of God. Instead, they were guided by the desires of the flesh and eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16).

Desire is a neutral emotion. It can be either righteous or unrighteous, depending on whether it is aligned with God's direction. The tenth commandment deals with avoiding ungodly desires. The previous nine commandments address outward expressions of faithful obedience. The final command is distinct from the others as it concentrates on an internal struggle. Outward obedience alone was not sufficient. The heart of Israel must also conform to the moral principles of the Ten Commandments. In so doing, they would bring their desires in line with God's will.

Going Deeper

Most translations render Exodus 20:17 as, "You shall not covet." We associate covetousness with sinful behavior because of the instruction in the Bible for us to be on guard against it. However, coveting is not sinful. The Hebrew word *hamad* is accurately translated "to desire or delight in."¹ The ancient Greek translation (the

1. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 294. In the Old Testament, *hamad* is used both positively—such as desiring God's word (Psa 19:10)—and negatively (cf. Gen 3:6). The object desired determines whether the desire is sinful.

Septuagint) uses *epithumeo* in Exodus 20:17, which is most often rendered “to desire or long for something or someone.”²

When does coveting become sinful? It becomes sinful when the object of our desire does not rightfully belong to us or is in direct violation of God’s instruction. Thus, Moses qualifies the command: “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 is your neighbor’s” (Exod 20:17). All of these are people and possessions, which belong to the household of another. They are in descending order of importance. Notice each particular in the Lord’s command:

- Neighbor’s wife—she is given priority due to the sanctity of marriage and the danger of adultery.
- Male and female servants—this desire is rooted in selfishness and materialism as more servants increased the estate of another person.
- Livestock—among nomadic people, livestock demonstrated wealth. You must not increase your wealth by stealing or defrauding your neighbor.
- Summary—anything that is your neighbor’s possession is a “catch all” phrase to keep selfish desires in check.

2. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: UBS, 1989), 1: 289.

To desire and to try to obtain the property of another is to be dissatisfied with what God has given, and thus to show lack of faith in his love.

A second focus in this command is the welfare of one's neighbor. Sinful desires violate the "second greatest command" to love your neighbor as yourself (Matt 22:39; cf. Lev 19:18). What people desire often determines what type society they will create. We should never desire to harm our neighbor by taking what is rightfully his. Loving your neighbor as yourself motivates you to contribute good to society, and acting on illicit desires undermines society's moral fiber. Unchecked desires leads to a violation of God's other commands in the Decalogue. Desiring another's possessions leads to stealing. Lusting after another man's wife could progress to adultery. Thus, the final command is of vital importance as each person must keep his/her desires within the parameters of the Law given by the Lord. Such would ensure both corporate and individual holiness.

Covetousness and the New Testament

In the New Testament, warnings against covetousness appear both in Jesus' teaching in the Gospels and in Paul's letters. These warnings remind us of the peril in valuing any earthly possession more than our relationship with God. In Matthew 6:24, Jesus states that a Christian cannot serve both God and material things. Paul twice describes covetousness as "idolatry" (Eph 5:5; Col 3:5).

The word “idolatry” is a compound word meaning one who worships an object as God. Only God is worthy of our reverence and devotion. Understanding the proper value of possessions is key to knowing the purpose of life. We are created to worship and serve God and not material, temporal things.

A parable that clearly makes this point is found in Luke 12:13-21. Jesus is approached by a man who wants the Lord to divide the man’s inheritance with his brother. It appears the man feels defrauded by his brother. Jesus does not give the man a ruling. Instead, Jesus teaches him about the purpose of life and how this relates to possessions. Note Luke 12:15, “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.’” Following this, Jesus illustrates his point with a parable about a man who prepares for his future but not his death. God calls him a fool (v. 20) and those who follow his course of life will not be “rich toward God.” In our materialistic culture, we must heed the words of Jesus and evaluate what we’re making our first priority. Are we seeking to become more wealthy or more faithful as our chief pursuit?

Application

How do we apply the final of the ten commandments and its prohibition against covetousness? Our desires lead to choices, which characterize our lives. Thus, we

must know how to combat this scheme of Satan. Note a few principles which might help us in our struggle with immoral desires.

First, we must remember the source and end result of unlawful desires. The final commandment is not a prohibition against coveting per se. It is prohibition against lust. Our adversary uses our passions to deceive us into taking the hook of sin (Jas 1:13–15). He “lures” and “entices” us by our desires (v. 13). When we act on them, it leads us down sin’s path ending in death (vv. 14–15). As an example, consider Achan’s folly in Joshua 7. In the previous chapter, Israel had conquered Jericho, and the Lord had commanded them to devote everything for destruction (6:16–17). In Joshua 7, Israel was defeated at Ai because someone in their camp took some of the devoted things. Joshua confronted Achan, and Achan responded, “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. And see, they are hidden in the earth inside my tent, with the silver underneath” (Josh 7:21). Achan started with unlawful desire and ended in death.

Second, we must heed the New Testament’s teaching on coveting as it relates to materialism. Our Western culture pressures us to acquire more possessions and wealth. A bigger house, a larger salary, and expensive vacations are the markers of success. Many people measure their self-worth by this fleeting standard.

Pursuing such things makes temporary possessions our idol (Eph 5:5; 3:5). The problem is not with things. The issue is with us. Money and physical possessions are neutral, and we should use the things we have to glorify and serve the Lord (1 Tim 6:19–20).

The key to overcoming a covetous, materialistic heart is learning contentment. In Philippians, Paul gives three keys to contentment, which will help us with this struggle:

1. We must have the right purpose for our life (1:21). Paul states, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” Our goal in life is not to attain possessions. Rather, it is to serve Christ with all our heart.
2. We must give our lives in ministry to others (2:3–4). Paul instructs us to put the interests of others before our own and to follow the example of Christ. Attending to this instruction helps curtail selfish desires, which might lead us down the path of covetousness.
3. We must have the right aspirations (3:3–8). Paul was an accomplished Jew with many accolades. He considered these things as “rubbish” in comparison to knowing Christ. There is nothing more valuable than our relationship with Christ. Such an attitude keeps our desires in line with God’s will.

Conclusion

God has abundantly blessed each one of us, and we must be prayerful and thankful (Phil 4:6–7). It is not sinful to desire good things for your life. We must not,

however, allow them to become our master. We must strive to keep our desires in line with God's instruction. This will enable us to glorify God and will keep us from suffering the consequences of other sinful pursuits.

Discussion

1. How does Exodus 20:17 help us apply the moral instructions found in the other nine commandments?
2. What are some biblical principles that will allow us to make sure we're aligning our desires with God's instruction?
3. How does covetousness often lead to other sinful behaviors?
4. How does covetousness (materialism) relate to idolatry?
5. How does contentment help us with this struggle?