

BE CONTENT**EXODUS 20:17**

Over the July 4th weekend back in in 2011, a group of motorcyclists gathered in Onondaga, New York, to ride in protest against the New York state law that requires motorcycle riders to wear a helmet. One of those riding in protest was a 55-year-old man. During the ride, his motorcycle spun out of control, and he flew headfirst over the handlebars. His head struck the pavement, and his skull was fractured. He was pronounced dead at the hospital. The police and the doctor treating the man said afterward that if he'd been wearing a helmet, he probably would have survived the accident. The group organizing the protest ride said that while they encourage the voluntary use of motorcycle helmets, they oppose mandatory helmet laws. Whatever. You can't miss the irony of this accidental death, however. The man died protesting a law that—if he had obeyed it—would have saved his life.

Today we come to the end of our reflection on the Ten Commandments – God's Big Ten. Many people see them as overly negative rules that restrict our personal freedom unnecessarily. They'd prefer to see them as God's suggestions we have the option to follow if we want to rather than laws we're expected to obey. But God's intent – like the motorcycle helmet law – was always to enhance, enrich, and protect our lives by informing us and warning us against what will damage and destroy us. Our culture is becoming increasingly ignorant regarding God's Big Ten. Kelton Research conducted a poll of 1,000 people to determine basic knowledge of the Ten Commandments. 80% of those polled knew that a Big Mac had two all-beef patties and 62% knew that it had pickles. But less than 50% could remember even seven of the God's Big Ten. In another "man on the street" informal poll, most people asked could remember the names of all four of the Beatles rock group, but many could not even remember one commandment. That's one reason we've read all Ten Commandments each week. We need to be reminded, too. Let's do it one last time for a while.

This morning I invite you to think with me about the very last of God's Big Ten. "You must not covet your neighbor's house. You must not covet your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, ox or donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor." (Ex. 20: 17 NLT) Don't think because it's the last commandment, it's the least important one. In fact, a good argument can be made this is the most important commandment of all. God commanded everyone, everywhere for all time and eternity to avoid coveting. That can only happen when we learn how to be content. Be content. That's the positive value behind the negative: don't covet. Two questions today. Here's the first one.

HOW CAN I AVOID COVETOUSNESS?

Avoiding covetousness begins when we recognize its true nature. Unlike some of the other commandments – stealing, murder, adultery, lying – covetousness is an attitude of your heart and mind rather than an act you go out and commit. Covetousness is desire gone wrong. Are all desires wrong and sinful? Of course not! If you had no desire to eat, you'd starve. If you had no desire to cloth your body or have a home, you'd likely die of exposure. God gave each of us a built in desire to have friendships and

relationships – to love and to be loved. God’s given us a desire to make some kind of contribution to this world while we’re here. Many desires are straight from God and have been hard wired into what it means to be a human being.

But coveting is a desire gone wrong in at least two ways. One demonstration of coveting is envy. One dictionary defines envy as “a feeling of discontented or resentful longing aroused by someone else’s possessions, qualities, or luck.” That’s envy. That’s what God is specifically forbidding or condemning here in God’s Big Ten. While God doesn’t condemn wanting things, He forbids us to want things that rightfully belong to others. Envy is a kind of all-consuming lust for the money, the possessions, the relationships, the reputation, or the position of another human being.

Another demonstration of coveting is greed. Again, one dictionary defines greed as “intense and selfish desire for something, especially wealth, power, or food.” Greed doesn’t necessarily want what belongs to another person. Greed just wants something more than anything else. It can even want good things, but in a bad way. Is wanting to have money wrong? No. Can you want money too much? Oh, yeah. Is wanting possessions wrong? No. Can you want possessions too much? Yes. Is wanting sex wrong? Not in and of itself. But can you want sex with the wrong people? Of course. Is wanting to be successful in life wrong? Nope. But can you want success too much? Certainly. Just about anything in life can become an obsession – the driving force in your life or the central focus around which everything else revolves. The Bible says there’s only one thing that deserves that place in our lives. Not a thing but a person: God and God alone. The Bible says greed is a form of idolatry because it makes whatever you are pursuing obsessively your real god. Whatever it is, that’s what you worship and live for. That’s what matters the most to you. That’s your god.

Envy and greed are the two sides of a coin called covetousness. They get you to buy into a dangerous, deadly, and disastrous lie: happiness or contentment is the result of accumulating and possessing things. No culture believes that lie more fervently than American culture. Our Declaration of Independence says you and I have a God-given right “to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” I was fascinated to learn Thomas Jefferson’s first draft of that document read “to life, liberty, and the pursuit of possessions,” but a committee voted to change the phrase to “the pursuit of happiness” instead. Culturally, we believe Jefferson’s original version. Pursuing happiness and pursuing possessions is an exact equivalent in the mind of most Americans.

Jesus was very direct about covetousness. On one occasion, He was teaching when a man stepped out of the crowd and said, “Teacher, please tell my brother to divide our father’s estate with me.” Jesus seemed to be appalled. This man was listening to God Incarnate in human flesh and bone, but instead he was obsessed about some trivial money matter. Jesus said, “Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own.” (Lk. 12:13, 15 NLT)

Few of us will admit to having an ongoing problem with envy or greed. But we all covet – it’s just that we covet different things. The devil became the devil because he

coveted. He wanted something he couldn't have or be. He wanted to be like God. It's no accident God placed this commandment right at the end of this list because it's kind of a summary warning statement. God forbade the worship of other gods or making idols. The Bible says, "Don't be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshipping the things of this world." (Col. 3:5 NLT) Why do people steal? Covetousness. Why do people commit adultery? Covetousness. Why do people lie? Often because of covetousness. Each of God's Big Ten can be broken by covetousness.

Avoiding covetousness also depends on recognizing its tragic results. The first one is fatigue. Both envy and greed are tyrannical masters commanding you to get more, get more, and then get some more. And you never get enough. This can show up most prominently in attitudes having to do with your work and your income. We can easily lose a healthy balance between work, worship, and rest. I've known too many people over the years so focused on work and making money, they neglect their families, they neglect their own bodies, and they even neglect their relationship with God. No time for church. No time to grow spiritually. The Bible says, "Don't wear yourself out trying to get rich. Be wise enough to know when to quit." (Pr. 23:4 NLT)

Another tragic result is debt. The Bible observes, "Just as the rich rule the poor, so the borrower is servant to the lender." (Pr. 22:7 NLT) Coveting will bust your budget. Google told me this week that consumer debt will likely reach \$4 trillion by the end of this year for Americans. Individual Americans are spending about 10% of their income each month paying on nonmortgage debts like auto loans, credit cards, personal, and student loans. We think the problem is we don't make enough money. The real problem is we want too much. There's a big difference between needs and "greeds"! A lot of things we think we need are really just "greeds" at the end of the day.

Yet another result of covetousness is worry. Again, the Bible observes, "People who work hard sleep well, whether they eat little or much. But the rich seldom get a good night's sleep." (Ecc. 5:12 NLT) When money and things become the focus of your life, you will inevitably worry. The more you have, the more you have to worry about! How am I going to protect it? How should I invest it? How can I avoid paying taxes on it? A fourth result of covetousness is conflict. The Bible says, "What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you?" (Jam. 4:1 NLT) Conflict is the inevitable result of never being satisfied and always wanting more. The top three reasons for divorce are lack of communication, unfaithfulness, and money issues. Financial incompatibility in a marriage is often a result of covetousness.

You can sum it by saying the last tragic result of covetousness is dissatisfaction. God says in His Word, "Those who love money will never have enough. How meaningless to think that wealth brings true happiness!" (Ecc. 5:10 NLT) The thrill of getting and having things is only temporary. The excitement wears off quickly. We get bored with things and used to things very quickly – a new car, a new house, new clothes, new tech stuff. Are you still thrilled by whatever you got last Christmas? Do you even remember what you got last Christmas? Covetousness will just leave you feeling empty and dissatisfied. A wealthy widow worth millions of dollars died in Beverly Hills, California.

At the funeral someone said, “It’s so sad. She had so much to live for.” But another person observed, “No. She had so much to live on. She had nothing to live for.” It’s wise to ask ourselves now and then, “What am I living for? Is the primary goal of my life just to get more or to have more? Is my focus on being happy or pleasing God? What do I think about the most? Talk about the most? What or whom am I living for?” Here’s a second question I want you to help me answer today.

HOW CAN I LEARN CONTENTMENT?

The great Christian leader, Paul, wrote something very interesting that’s in the Bible, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.” (Ph. 4:11 NIV) Apparently, contentment doesn’t just come naturally to you, me, or anyone else. Contentment is something you have to learn. You’re not a contented person by nature. Neither am I. Learning also implies a process. In other words, we don’t learn how to be content all of a sudden. It takes some time, some thought, some attitudinal adjustments, and – above all – the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds to become and stay content.

What are some ways we can learn contentment? Well, first of all, resist comparing yourself to others. Why do we play the comparison game? Because in our culture, the way we often keep score is by our possessions. A person’s net worth often determines his or her self-worth. Now, part of our brain knows that’s a ridiculous lie. We know there are plenty of millionaires who are absolute jerks. We also know poor people can be wonderfully gracious. Nevertheless, the temptation to measure self-worth by one’s net worth is very strong in our culture. All the more reason why we have to bombard ourselves with God’s perspective repeatedly. What’s that? You’re a creature of great value because God created you in His image. In addition, you’re so important to God He sent His Son, Jesus, to die on a cross and be raised to life again so your sins could be forgiven and so you could enjoy an eternal relationship with Him. We need to remind ourselves continually who we are in Jesus and because of Jesus. Take every opportunity to verbalize that truth to your kids and grandkids because we live in a culture that loves to tear down people’s value or peg it to things that don’t matter.

Here’s another way to refuse to play the comparison game. Learn how to admire without having to acquire! How do you react when you see somebody else with a nice, new house, a new car, a new smart phone, or a new whatever? Do you say, “I wish I had it” or can you just be glad for the other person. You don’t have to own or possess everything in order to enjoy it. In fact, if the only things you enjoy in life are the things you own, you’re going to spend a lot of time being miserable in this life.

Learn how to be content. How? Well, secondly, rejoice in what you already have. I read about a lady who confessed she struggled with envy of her more affluent sister. But one visit helped her get a better perspective. She and her son were visiting her sister at her palatial estate. Eight bedrooms. Eight bathrooms. A large swimming pool. The less affluent sister’s son was enjoying the giant pool while the two sisters sat beside it. He swam up to his aunt and said, “When I get home, I’m going to swim in my pool. We have a pool like this in the backyard.” Then he added, “All we have to do is

get Daddy to blow it up and put water in it!” What a great perspective! Rather than clinging to envy, we can recognize and rejoice in what we already have as being special. Contentment comes not from getting something bigger and better, but from learning to enjoy what we’ve already been given.

As we celebrate Thanksgiving this week, let’s appreciate consciously and be grateful to God intentionally for all He has done for us and given to us. The Bible says, “Enjoy what you have rather than desiring what you don’t have. Just dreaming about nice things is meaningless—like chasing the wind.” (Ecc. 6:9 NLT) If it weren’t for God, none of us would have anything. Everything you and I have today including the very breath in our lungs is a gift from God. So today, this week, on Thanksgiving Day, and every day thereafter, thank God for the gift of Himself. Thank Him for salvation given through His Son, Jesus. Thank Him for your family and friends. Thank Him for your health. Thank Him for providing for your needs. Ask Him to help you get and keep an attitude of gratitude. Thankless people are a stench in God’s nostrils. Thankful people are like a sweet smelling perfume to our gracious God who gives and gives and gives.

Learn how to be content. How? Thirdly, release what you’ve been given to others. Listen to what Scripture says, “Teach those who are rich in this world not to be proud and not to trust in their money, which is so unreliable. Their trust should be in God, who richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment. Tell them to use their money to do good. They should be rich in good works and generous to those in need, always being ready to share with others. By doing this they will be storing up their treasure as a good foundation for the future so that they may experience true life.” (1 Tim. 6:17-19 NLT)

I know many of us will say, “Rick, that’s great advice for rich people, but I’m not wealthy.” Yes, you are. Compared to the rest of the world’s population, everyone in this room is rich. The fact is that all of us here today are in the top 1-2% of people who have ever lived on this planet in terms of material possessions. That Scripture does apply to you and me. You know what that Scripture underlines? Remember who gave you all you have. God Himself. As a result, don’t get all proud because of what you’ve been given. And don’t ever think of yourself as better than people with less. Then, remember where to put your security. Don’t put your ultimate trust in money. The only real security in this life is in God – not in having a job, not in your bank or your investment portfolio, and not even in your own intelligence and ability to work hard.

That Scripture also reminds us to use your money to do good for others. The best way to kill that monster by the name of Covetousness is to drive a stake in its heart by giving money away. How much? Give until it hurts. That’s how you know you’re starting to get sacrificial. First, tithe your income to the Lord’s work cheerfully so that His Kingdom can be enlarged and extended. Then, open your hand to people who are in need as well as other worthy organizations and people who need your assistance. When you live like that you are putting covetousness to death in your own heart, you’re learning how to be content, and you’re also putting yourself into a position to receive some kind of eternal reward in Heaven. I don’t have any idea what those rewards will be, but God promises rewards to those who practice contentment and live generously His way.

Learn to be content. How? Finally, refocus on what's going to last. You and I have to remind ourselves of what matters and has permanent value constantly. The Bible says, "We fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever." (2 Cor. 4:18 NLT) Take a look around this morning. Then, close your eyes and imagine the world outside this room. Every non-human thing you see is temporary – it will die, or decay, or rust, or fall apart, or wear out. That means you and I must consciously reorganize our lives around eternal priorities. Outside of human beings, the only things that are eternal are things you can't see – your relationship with God, your relationships with others, things like love, joy, grace, peace, and forgiveness. That realization should drive us to the only conclusion that makes any sense. Jesus said, "Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need." (Mt. 6:33 NLT)

Years ago, a little boy named Dustin entered the Smarties stage of life. You know what they are, right? Smarties are candies. A row of multicolored, chalk-like, bite-size candies wrapped in clear plastic, about 10 to 12 pieces in a pack. They're perfect for sharing. Now, Smarties are not my favorite kind of candy, but if someone offered me one, I'd probably take it and eat it.

When Dustin's pastor saw Dustin come into church with a fresh roll of Smarties, he just had to ask Dustin if he could have one. That's the day Dustin became a Smarties superhero to his pastor! Dustin peeled out a piece with a smile and handed it over gladly to his pastor. From that day on, for the next two years, every time Dustin got a pack of Smarties, he took out the first one and set it aside for his pastor. Good kid. Great kid. Every Sunday, Dustin would track his pastor down at church and generously offer him one or more Smarties. He did it gladly, with a smile, like he enjoyed it or something.

Sometimes Dustin would open a pack of Smarties during the week, but he would still save his pastor the first round, sugary, chalky tablet. He kept it in his pocket. By the time Sunday came, the Smarty could be a little mangy and would have lint and other pocket stuff stuck to it, but he never forgot to bring it to his pastor. In those cases, the pastor thanked him and put it in his pocket so he could "enjoy it later."

Dustin loved Smarties. He also loved his pastor. Every week before the worship service began, Dustin and his pastor shared a time of communion. Jesus was present as they shared a few moments of conversation and partook of some Smarties together. Dustin's mother pointed out that the packs of Smarties she bought for him had ten pieces, and she saw this weekly ritual as Dustin's introduction to tithing. Whatever. Maybe it was just a little boy who was learning that contentment is a direct byproduct of sharing and being generous.

God has given everybody here some Smarties. No, not candy. Things like money. Possessions. Gifts. Talents. Health. Time. Wisdom. The ability to show love. How am I doing with my Smarties? How are you doing with your Smarties?