

SERIES: Ten Stupid Things People Do to Mess Up Their Lives

SERMON: **Looking for Life in All the Wrong Places**

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 20:17

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Note: This sermon was prepared by Pastor Mike Andrus but was actually delivered by Pastor Dick High because of Mike's illness on Sunday morning.

This summer we have been examining the Ten Commandments, and today our focus will be on the Tenth one. We actually have one more to go since we skipped the Seventh during our single-service Sundays. But even that will not be the end of our series, for we are planning three follow-up messages on closely related topics. We plan to conclude the series the first Sunday of September. Then the following week Josh will launch a four-week series on the book of Jonah.

I want to take the opportunity this morning to thank Audrey Schultz for her amazing art work displayed on the wall behind me. She has done an artistic representation of each of the Ten Commandments and they are both beautiful and helpful. Thank you Audrey.

The Tenth Commandment speaks to us more about our hearts than our outward actions. It moves our attention from actions to attitudes, from forbidden deeds to forbidden desires.<sup>1</sup> It is about priorities and what we value most in life. The Tenth Commandment is found in Exodus chapter 20, verse 17:

*"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."*

### **What is the point of the Tenth Commandment?**

One of the first challenges we have is to understand what is meant by coveting. It is not a word our culture uses much anymore, and its closest synonym, "greed," is more often viewed positively than negatively by many Americans. Many of you remember the "Greed is good" speech given by Michael Douglas in the movie, *Wall Street*. He is speaking as Gordon Gekko, a corporate raider at the shareholders' meeting of Teldar Paper, Inc.

*"Greed, for lack of a better word, is good, greed is right, greed works, greed clarifies, cuts through and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed in all of its forms, greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge has marked the upward surge of mankind and greed, you mark my words, will not only save Teldar Paper but that other malfunctioning corporation called the U.S.A."*

The other day I heard an economist extolling the virtues of debt. He was urging people to borrow everything they could get their hands on so they could leverage their purchases of new homes, cars, and boats while prices are low.

When faced with these kinds of absolute contradiction of what God tells us in the Tenth Commandment, it is important for us to carefully define coveting for what it is. I would like to suggest as a definition . . .

**Definition of coveting: desire gone wrong.** The term “covet” in the original Hebrew simply means “to desire earnestly.” Now clearly there is nothing *inherently* wrong with desire, even earnest desire. God made us to be creatures of desire. Our desire for food reminds us to eat. Our desire to accomplish something of lasting value motivates us to work. Our desire for friendship draws us into community. Our desire for intimacy drives us to get married and have children. We all have many healthy desires, including the deepest and best of all, which is to know God.

So if desire itself can be good, coveting or greed must be desire gone bad. It is desire for the wrong thing or at the wrong time or in the wrong place or to the wrong degree or for the wrong reason, or all of the above. It is desire out of control. The Tenth Commandment specifically mentions a number of things that frequently become the focus of desire gone bad: a neighbor’s house, his spouse, his servant, or his ox or donkey (the donkey, I guess, is the first-century equivalent of a BMW). This list is not exhaustive but suggestive, as is evident in that the list concludes with “anything” that belongs to our neighbor.

I suggest that included in the “anything” would be our neighbor’s attributes (their looks, brains, talents, personality). We are not to covet their station in life (marriage, singleness, children, retired status). We are not to covet their spiritual attainments (place of ministry, spiritual gifts, honor). And, of course, we are not to covet their possessions (house, cars, big-screen TV’s, vacation homes, clothes, jewelry, toys).

**Two distorted philosophies of life the Tenth Commandment rejects.** The first is more obvious than the second. It is hedonism. The hedonist believes falsely that pleasure is the sole or chief good in life, that happiness comes from having more. That our culture has largely bought into hedonism is evident in so many ways. The ads scream at us, *Go for the gusto; you deserve it; produce more, buy more, have more*. Life to the hedonist is a never-ending cycle of upward mobility and increasing pleasure. He believes life should always be getting easier, better, more painless, worry-free and exciting. Such an attitude replaces the heavenly paradise with an earthly one and focuses all our attention on the here and now.

To such an attitude the Scriptures respond clearly. “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36). “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 11:17).

The Tenth Commandment clearly rejects hedonism. But while it is false that meaning and happiness come from having more, it is also false that meaning and happiness necessarily come from having less, a philosophy known as asceticism. The ascetic practices strict self denial,

rejecting the pleasure found in God's creation. H.L. Mencken once defined Puritanism as "the haunting fear that someone somewhere may be happy." This was actually unfair to the Puritans, for they were not ascetics and enjoyed life a great deal, but what Mencken described is not far from the attitude of some Christians I have known.

As a philosophy of life asceticism is also impossible to square with Scripture. 1 Timothy 4:4 says, "Everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving." 1 Timothy 6:17 speaks of God as one "who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." God is not opposed to happiness or pleasure. He is the one who created us and gave us the ability to experience pleasure. We deny God's goodness when we feel guilty over what He has chosen to give us.

The Tenth Commandment rejects hedonism but certainly does not require asceticism. It allows desire and pleasure and possessions; it just forbids us from engaging in the wrong kind of desire at the wrong time in the wrong place to the wrong degree and for the wrong reasons.

### **What generates covetousness? Wrong Priorities.**

We covet when we love something more than we love God. Possessions, power, careers, recognition, even relationships are all good things; but we have to be careful that they don't occupy the place in our hearts that God alone deserves. What is it that you have set your heart on, that you dream of and plan for and protect at all costs? Is there some desire you are unwilling or unable to give up? Do you belong to the *Cult of the Next Thing*? Pastor Mark Buchanan writes about it in the form of a confession:

*I belong to the Cult of the Next Thing. It's dangerously easy to get enlisted. It happens by default—not by choosing the cult, but by failing to resist it. The Cult of the Next Thing is consumerism cast in religious terms. It has its own litany of sacred words: more, you deserve it, new, faster, cleaner, brighter. It has its own deep-rooted liturgy: charge it, instant credit, no down-payment, deferred payment, no interest for three months. It has its own preachers, evangelists, prophets, and apostles: ad men, pitchmen, and celebrity sponsors. It has, of course, its own shrines, chapels, temples, meccas: malls, superstores, club warehouses. It has its own sacraments: credit and debit cards. It has its own ecstatic experience: the spending spree. The Cult of the Next Thing's central message proclaims, "Crave and spend, for the Kingdom of Stuff is here."<sup>ii</sup>*

Solomon tried this cult and warned us it didn't work. He should know. He reflected back on his life and wrote in Ecclesiastes 2:4-11:

*"I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards ... I owned more herds and flocks than anyone before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself ... I acquired a harem as well – the delights of the heart of man ... I denied myself nothing my eyes desired ... Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun."*

Chuck Colson, a hatchet man for President Nixon, went to prison for his involvement in the Watergate scandal. It was in prison that he turned his life over to Jesus Christ. Only then did he realize, as he put it, that he “had climbed up to the top of the ladder, and finally realized that the ladder was leaning against the wrong building.” That was his way of saying that his priorities were all screwed up.

The bitter irony of covetousness is that it makes us blind to our actual wealth and prevents us from enjoying the beauty which is already ours. So many people don’t enjoy the home they have because their eyes are captured by their neighbor’s home. They don’t enjoy the friendships available to them because they envy those who live in the world of glamorous, sophisticated people.<sup>iii</sup> They don’t enjoy the beauty of the Flint Hills because they envy those who live in Colorado.

### **How dangerous is coveting? Very.**

There’s a tendency for us to think that the last of the Ten Commandments is kind of an anti-climax. We’ve been through idolatry, murder, stealing, lying, and next week we will examine adultery. These are huge sins which no Christian would minimize, unless, of course, he’s trying to mitigate his own guilt. But coveting doesn’t seem so serious. We all acknowledge we do it; we just don’t readily acknowledge that it belongs in the same league. In fact, one commentator was bold enough to express what many others have probably thought: “It would have seemed more logical to begin with the bland, throw-away sin like coveting, and then work up to the big stuff.”<sup>iv</sup>

Rather than being a bland, throw-away sin, coveting may actually be the most dangerous of all the sins mentioned in the Ten Commandments, for nearly all the rest of the Ten Commandments have their source in coveting. As Judy pointed out to the children, we often lie to get what we covet; we work seven days a week to obtain it, violating the Sabbath principle; or we steal to get it. And how many murders are the direct result of coveting? You are familiar with the story of David and Bathsheba – how David's one sin of coveting another man's wife turned into lust, adultery, deceit, murder, and manipulation.

The sad thing is that so often we not only do not get the pleasure we thought we would out of the thing we coveted; we actually bring pain, brokenness, and destruction on ourselves and the people we love when we go after them. We cease being able to enjoy life. We end up as slaves to our passions. We stop being human. We die inside. Isn’t that what the Apostle James warns about in his letter, 4:1-3:

*“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”*

It’s interesting to me that the Apostle Paul uses coveting as the paradigm example to explain an

experience we have all had, namely that forbidden things become more desirable just because they are forbidden. Listen to Romans 7:7-12:

*What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet."*

*But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. . . . I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death.*

*For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.*

St. Augustine, describes a boyhood escapade in his *Confessions* that demonstrates the truth of Paul's words:

*"There was a pear tree near our vineyard, laden with fruit. One stormy night we rascally youths set out to rob it and carry our spoils away. We took off a huge load of pears—not to feast upon ourselves, but to throw them to the pigs, though we ate just enough to have pleasure of forbidden fruit. They were nice pears, but it was not the pears my wretched soul coveted, for I had plenty better at home. I picked them simply in order to become a thief. The only feast I got was a feast of iniquity, and that I enjoyed to the full. . . . The desire to steal was awakened simply by the prohibition of stealing. The pears were desirable simply because they were forbidden."*

Friends, covetousness encompasses all the rest of the Commandments and actually points us back to the First Commandment, to have no other gods before the Lord. "Coveting is idolatry," Paul says in Colossians 3:5. It is worshiping ME—my wants, my desires.

### **What is the only antidote to covetousness? Contentment.**

A sage once said, "If you want to make a man happy, add not to his possessions but take away from his desires." Covetousness simply cannot be satisfied by the acquisition of things. You know that's true. Your whole life is a testimony to it. Desire is never satisfied by acquisition. Get a new car and how long does the thrill last? Until the new car smell goes away. Or until a friend gets an even nicer one. Get a new computer or a new cell phone and how long does the satisfaction last? Until another model comes out with more bells and whistles. John D. Rockefeller was absolutely honest when he was asked, "How much does it take to make a man happy?" His answer: "Just a little more." The only cure for covetousness is contentment.

I have known relatively few really contented people. I think they are a rare find. In fact, the Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs wrote a wonderful little book entitled, "The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment." But though it is rare, it is a great biblical asset. 1 Tim. 6:6 says, "Godliness with contentment is great gain." Hebrews 13:5: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have." Paul said, "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.” (Phil. 4:11-12). And remember that Paul was under house arrest when he penned those words.

For a long time I wondered why Paul had to learn to live with abundance. Doesn't that come naturally? No, as a matter of fact, it doesn't. Not if you're talking about living well. The test of prosperity is much more difficult than the test of affliction. When afflicted the default mechanism of most Christians is prayer and trust. Those are much harder to practice when we are prosperous. Remember Psalm 119:67? “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.”

Finally, I want to ask, what produces contentment? If covetousness is wrong and contentment is the only antidote to it, then it is critical that we know how to become content. I want to suggest five attitudes that contribute immeasurably toward contentment and thus help us to avoid covetousness.

### **What attitudes produce contentment?**

**Humility** is a mindset which recognizes that God is in charge, and I am not. God chooses either to bless or not, and my job is to accept whatever he chooses and to align my will with his. This is a stark contrast to the American “I deserve it” mentality. God does not tell us to be wimps and doormats, but neither does he tell us to demand our rights and assert our wills against others. Jesus Himself said to His Father, “Not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). Next time you are tempted to demand something, picture God holding that thing in his hand while you try to pry His fingers open to get it. Do you really want it that much?

**Trust** emphasizes that when God is our first love, everything else will fall into place. He will not abandon us. If we entrust ourselves to Him, we may not get what we think we need, but we will always get what we need. He knows what is best for us and He will do what is best for us. Jesus said to His disciples,

*“Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!”* (Matthew 7:9-11).

**Gratitude** is a determination to be thankful for whatever God chooses to bring into our lives. Whatever I receive, whatever circumstances I find myself in, I can be thankful that God is working it all for my good. Do you take time to really thank God for who He and what He does for us? Philippians 4:6-7 is so beautifully balanced: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” It tells us that it's OK to ask God for things, but it's not OK to be anxious about them. And in everything there should be thanksgiving or gratitude.

**Simplicity** is a commitment to clear out, scale down, and look for what we really, honestly need to truly live well. Believe me, it's a lot less than we tend to think. Simplicity is

using our freedom to live below our means. It frees us from slavery to our desires and slavery to our possessions. The writer of Proverbs wisely prayed, *"Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God"* (Proverbs 30:8-9).

Philip Barham tells the story of a rich industrialist who was disturbed to find a fisherman sitting lazily besides his boat. "Why aren't you out there fishing?" he asked.

"Because I've caught enough fish for today," said the fisherman.

"Why don't you catch more fish than you need," the rich man asked.

The fisherman responded, "What would I do with them?"

"You could earn more money," came the impatient reply, "and buy a better boat so you could go deeper and catch more fish. You could purchase nylon nets, catch even more fish, and make more money. Soon you'd have a fleet of boats and be rich like me."

The fisherman asked, "Then what would I do?"

"You could sit down and enjoy life," said the industrialist contemptuously.

"What do you think I'm doing now?" the fisherman replied as he looked placidly out to sea.

**Generosity** is the determination to share what God has entrusted to us. It flows from the recognition that all we have comes from God. We move from ownership to stewardship, using what is on loan to us for God's purposes to be a blessing to others. We reduce our consumption to be able to invest in things of eternal value. We value people and use things, instead of using people and valuing things. The Apostle Paul wrote,

*"Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share."* (1 Timothy 6:17-18).

Contentment, friends, flows from a life that is God-centered and God-oriented. There is no other path to true happiness. The Psalms are full of descriptions of this kind of joyful, satisfied life and point us consistently to God as the real source of contentment. God is not a means to an end; He is the end, the goal of human existence.

*"You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand"* (Psalm 16:11).

*"Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart"* (Psalm 37:4).

*"Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days"* (Psalm 90:14).

*"Blessed is the man ... whose delight is in the law of the LORD, on his law he meditates day and night." And the result? "He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does*

*prosper*" (Psalm 1:2-3).

**Conclusion:** There is something unique about the Tenth Commandment. It teaches us, I think more than any other, precisely how sinful we are. You see, this commandment, as Martin Luther observed,

*“. . . is addressed not to those whom the world considers rogues, but precisely to the most upright—to people who wish to be commended as honest and virtuous because they have not offended against the preceding commandments.”*

The Tenth Commandment gets everyone of us. Oh, I know I said when preaching on the Eighth Commandment that I was preaching to a bunch of thieves, but I backed off a bit and allowed for the few who are extremely conscientious about stealing. I could have said last week that I was speaking to bunch of liars and I wouldn't have been far off. But I can say with absolutely no fear of contradiction that I am speaking to a church full of coveters this morning, for we all know the experience of wanting the wrong thing at the wrong time in the wrong place to the wrong degree or for the wrong reason.

What do you really want from life? Isn't it joy, peace, contentment, fulfillment? Well, friends, that's actually what God wants you to have. That's what He made you for. He knows just how hungry and thirsty your soul is, and He wants to satisfy your deepest longings.

But there's only one way—through His Son Jesus Christ. God does not offer Him as a better way of getting what we want. No; God gives us Jesus and says, “Even if you don't realize it, He is really all you need.” When we come to Jesus we receive the forgiveness of sin through His death and resurrection. We receive the promise of eternal life with God. We receive the promise that He will never leave us for forsake us. What else do we need?<sup>v</sup>

And as for all the things we spend so much time coveting, God says, “Trust me. I will provide everything you truly need.” Michael Horton writes,

*“It is not poverty or wealth that leads us to contentment and trust in the Lord, but the confidence that if God provided so richly for our salvation by choosing, redeeming, calling, adopting, and justifying us, and by sending His Spirit to cause us to grow up into Christ's likeness, then surely we can count on Him for the less essential matters of daily existence.”<sup>vi</sup>*

Jesus said it even more plainly, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well.” (Matthew 6:33)

Prayer: Father, teach us today that our deepest desires are met in Jesus, and in Jesus alone. Amen.

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- i. J. I. Packer, *Keeping the Ten Commandments*, 101.
  - ii. Mark Buchanan, “Trapped in the Cult of the Next Thing,” *Christianity Today* (September 6, 1999), 64.
  - iii. J. Ellsworth Kalas, *The Ten Commandments from the Back Side*, 104.
  - iv. Anonymously quoted in Maxie D. Dunham, *Exodus*, 267.
  - v. Philip G. Ryden, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory*, 675.
  - vi. Michael Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom*, 247.