

Words of Life: 6. Do Not Covet
Deuteronomy 5:21; Romans 13:8-10
March 21, 2021
Pastor Tami Luckhardt

Over the past 5 weeks, we've spent time examining the Ten Commandments in an attempt to understand what they meant in the time they were written (in the time of Moses), what they meant to Jesus as he reinterpreted them, taught and lived them and how we can apply them to our lives today. We look at the words of Jesus because Jesus always takes us straight to the heart of the matter. His words help us see how these commandments can serve as guardrails to protect us and guidepost to keep us pointed towards the good and abundant life God intends for us. Today we are going to explore the last of these commandments, do not covet. We'll look at what coveting is, why it's unhealthy for us and three antidotes for coveting, taught by Jesus, to help us find contentment.

The Hebrew word for covet used in the Old Testament is "chamad" which means to strongly desire something, so much so that you will do anything to have it. Have you ever wanted something that badly? My sister Lisa and I were college roommates. In addition to being full time students, we both had part time jobs. I taught trombone lessons at the local music store. Lisa worked at Macy's in the women's clothing department. Well, you can probably guess who had the better wardrobe. And I coveted Lisa's clothes and was always asking if I could borrow this shirt or those pants. Lisa usually agreed but with the understanding that I would always ask before wearing something. One day, Lisa left for class before I did and as I was getting dressed, I remembered a new shirt that she had brought home the night before. This was long before cell phones so I couldn't ask her permission to wear it. I decided that I would go ahead and borrow it and then return it to her closet before she ever got home. Later that day while I was eating lunch in front of the music building, who should just happen to walk by? Lisa. I was embarrassed and she was upset, and rightfully so. I took something that wasn't mine and it caused damage to my relationship with my sister, one of the people I love most in the world.

Now not all desire is bad. Psalm 19:10 says, *The Lord's judgments are true. All of these are righteous! They are more desirable than gold...They are sweeter than honey...* Desire can be a positive thing. Like this past week when a pastor friend sent me an email telling me he was praying for me and I responded that I covet is prayers. Desiring prayer, having ambition in your life, setting goals and dreaming dreams are all good things. But "chamad" is talking about a different kind of desire. It means doing whatever it takes to acquire something that is not yours or that you should not have and allowing your mind to be consumed with the thought of having it.

Notice this commandment begins with "you shall not covet your neighbor's wife." It doesn't also say, "*you shall not covet your neighbor's husband*" because this was written in a patriarchal society when wives were seen as their husbands' possessions. It goes on to say, "*you shall not covet your neighbor's servants.*" This is a kinder, gentler way of saying "*you shall not covet their slaves*". It's important to understand the historical and cultural context in which this (and all scripture) was written to discover the timeless truths of God. We can see now that women as their husbands' possessions and slavery are not a part of God's will. The commandment goes on...*Do not covet their ox and donkey*; that's their John Deere Tractor and whatever vehicle is parked in their garage. In other words, do not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor. We see examples of coveting throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, perhaps one of the most memorable is the story of David. You remember David, the little shepherd boy who played

on his harp, slayed the giant Goliath and then grew up to become Israel's greatest king. God himself identifies David as "a man after God's own heart." And yet, despite all this, David also experienced temptation and at times, succumbed to it.

This story begins with David's army off at war. One spring evening, David was restless, so he got up and began pacing around on the roof of his house, the palace. Being the king, he had the tallest house so he could literally look down on his people. And across the way, he noticed this beautiful woman, probably still a teenager who is naked and bathing. He learns that her name is Bathsheba, she is the wife of Uriah, one of the men fighting on the front lines for David. But once David caught a glimpse of Bathsheba, she consumed his thoughts, and he began to deeply desire her. Author Walter Wangerin calls this the "moment of maybe", that split second in which we may be seized by the thought of having an affair with someone who is not our spouse. We either shut the door right then and there (recognizing the affair is wrong) or we entertain the thought. Perhaps this is how David felt that night. And Wangerin says, "Once you entertain that thought, it's a short walk from maybe to yes."

David sent his messengers to go and get her and he slept with her. Bathsheba became pregnant and David began to devise a plan to cover up his mess. He sent a messenger to retrieve Uriah under the pretenses that he wanted a report from the front lines. What he really hoped was that Uriah would sleep with his wife and cover up David's sin. But feeling loyal to his fellow soldiers, Uriah refused to even enter his house and instead, slept on the front step of David's palace.

Now David had no choice but to send Uriah back to the front lines but with a sealed note he had written to his general, Joab, instructing him to put Uriah out in front and then retreat the other troops so that Uriah would be struck down and die. Joab did as he was told. Uriah was killed and David married Bathsheba. This is called, desperately longing for what does not belong to you, and then taking it or stealing it and in the process, bringing harm to yourself and to others. We read about coveting in the New Testament as well. The primary Greek word used here is *pleonexia*. It's the combination of two words. *Pleion* which means more and *exo* which means to have. So *pleonexia* is an insatiable desire to have more. In Luke 12:15 Jesus uses this when he says, "*Guard yourself against all kinds of greed (all kinds of insatiable desires), after all, one's life isn't determined by one's possessions, even when someone is very wealthy.*" If Jesus was saying this to first century Jewish peasants who had nothing, just imagine how much more this applies to our lives today when we have so much more. Yet, we are constantly being bombarded by messages about how our lives would be better if we just had a little more stuff. I saw this commercial this week. It starts with the narrator saying, "Spring is finally here and you're just itching to upgrade your stuff." Then we see this woman dashing off her front porch, which is lined with mountains of unopened packages, towards a new, shiny car that is whizzing by. This is *pleonexia*. If you only had a different car, a different spouse, a different house... you'd finally be happy.

It was the 17th century philosopher, Blaise Pascal, who first said "*we all have a God-shaped vacuum--a place inside of our hearts-- that only God can fill. If we try to put anything else in there, it won't fill the need we have to know God.*" So how can we address coveting in our lives. In his book, *Words of Life*, Adam Hamilton suggests there are three antidotes to coveting-- three keys to contentment.

The first key to contentment is **gratitude**. Last fall, we invited you to keep a gratitude journal. I heard from many of you that it was a transformational experience. The simple act of recounting your blessings improved your sense of well-being and overall satisfaction in life. Gratitude in

your marriage strengthens your marriage. Gratitude expressed to employees creates a happier workplace. Grateful kids are happier kids. The more grateful we are for what we have, the less we feel the need to have for more.

The second key to contentment is **generosity**. It's hard to focus on something you desperately want when you are busy giving to others. Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Some of the happiest people I know are not necessarily the richest, but they are the most generous, generous with their time, talents or resources.

One of my favorite stories of generosity comes from two little girls. For the past three years during the month of March, sisters Emily and Ashley (with the help of their parents) have hosted a Cocoa Cafe in their driveway to raise funds for area food shelves during MN Food Share Month. The idea was originally born out of the 2018 challenge between the Messiah Youth Group and Messiah Kids to see which group could collect the most boxes of cereal. With the funds raised at the first Cocoa Cafe, Emily and Ashley were able to donate 60 boxes of cereal to the food shelf. In 2019, they donated \$500 and last year, the Cocoa Cafe raised \$913. Emily and Ashley told me that doing this makes them feel happy because they know the money goes to help people who need the food to survive. Giving to others quiets our desires for wanting more and increases our sense of satisfaction and happiness.

The third key to contentment is **love**. Jesus spoke of two important loves: love for God and love for one's neighbor. We see these two kinds of love woven throughout the commandments and how important they are as we fight the temptation to covet. Jesus describes love as more than just a feeling, it's a way of living, acting and being. We cannot love our parents and dishonor them. We cannot love our neighbor and kill them or sleep with their spouse. We cannot love our neighbor and steal from them or tell lies and gossip about them. And we cannot love our neighbor while fostering a craving for what is theirs and making plans to take it away from them. Coveting is a self-centered approach to life that is ultimately insatiable. But being grateful, generous and kind leads to contentment, satisfaction and joy. This is what I think Paul was writing about in Romans, chapter 13, *Don't be in debt to anyone, except for the obligation to love each other. Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law. The commandments, Don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't desire what others have, and any other commandments, are all summed up in one word: You must love your neighbor as yourself. Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is what fulfills the Law.* At the heart of all the commandments is not obligation but love.

There is a little woman who stands only 4"8" tall but is known as Big Sonia. Sonia Warshawski is one of the last remaining Holocaust survivors who speaks publicly about her wartime experience in Poland. At the age of 12, Sonia was sniffed out by police dogs while she hid from the Nazis under the floorboards beneath her bed. At 15, she watched her mother disappear behind gas chamber doors. Sonia's teenage years were a blur of concentration camps and death marches. On liberation day in 1945, she was accidentally shot through the chest, yet again miraculously survived. Sonia is the ultimate survivor, a bridge between cultures and generations. These days, Big Sonia is known as a diva wearing her signature leopard print and high heel shoes. She can barely see over the steering wheel, yet, at the age of 90, she insists on driving herself to work every day to run her late husband's tailor shop, John's Tailoring in Kansas City.

It was Edmund Burke who said, "all evil needs to succeed is for good to do nothing." Sonia is committed to doing something. She shares her story so that what happened to her and millions of other Jews, will never be forgotten. Sonia says, "I don't have the authority to forgive what was

done to others. But I will not hate.” In her tailor shop, there’s this sign that hangs right underneath the front counter. It’s the Ten Commandments. Sonia put it on prominent display as a statement of the principles that shape her life. Sonia explains her philosophy like this, “We were meant to spread love. We are to put goodness in our hearts. And we were made to help others where they need help. That’s what keeps me going.” Despite the horrible trauma she experienced as a young girl, these words still stick with her as the essence of what it means to be human. If anything, the Holocaust reinforced the importance of these commands to her. And these The Ten Commandments have the power to shape you and me just as powerfully. They were given to us by a loving God as guardrails to protect us and guideposts that point us to the good and abundant life God intends for us.

Let’s pray: Loving God, you have blessed me in so many ways. Help me to resist the need to have more and more, things I do not need and should not have. Instead, help me to live a life of gratitude, generosity and love. As I live out these commandments may they shape and guide my life each and every day. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Grow, Prayer, Study for the Week of March 21, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Loving God, I want to be a living example of Your love in our world. Let me learn to be content in all circumstances of my life, treating others with compassion and respect and settling differences with love and integrity. Open my heart to your ongoing presence so that I may grow in faithfulness and love and bring honor to Your name. Amen.

Monday, March 22

Scripture: Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 19:14

Do not desire and try to take your neighbor’s house. Do not desire and try to take your neighbor’s wife, male or female servant, ox, donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.

Now in the land the Lord your God is giving you, in your allotted property that you will receive there, you must not tamper with your neighbor’s property line, which has been previously established.

Observation: On its surface, the Tenth Commandment is about “property rights.” (Yes, ancient Israel viewed wife and servants as “property.”) But scholar John Goldingay pointed out that this commandment fit with Jesus’ later teaching. “They are to look to the inner attitude that lies behind many of those outward acts. Their neighbor’s wife may be better at managing the household his servants may be more hardworking; his animals may be sturdier. You could do your job much better if you had them. Be content with and do your best with what you have, says the command.”

Application: It’s not a sin to admire someone else’s nice things (or relationships). But have you ever found admiration turning into an almost obsessive wish that you could have something (or someone) who “belongs” with someone else? How can that damage you and others, even if you don’t act on it? In what ways has God helped you learn to pull away from that kind of excessive, destructive wanting?

Prayer: God of all, it’s so much harder to just check the Tenth Commandment off my “good deeds” list, because it’s about my wishes and thoughts. Teach me how to avoid wishing obsessively for someone else’s good things. Amen.

Tuesday, March 23

Scripture: Micah 2:1-2; 1 Kings 21:1-16

Doom to those who devise wickedness, to those who plan evil when they are in bed. By the light of morning they do it, for they are very powerful. They covet fields and seize them, houses and take them away. They oppress a householder and those in his house, a man and his estate.

Now it happened sometime later that Naboth from Jezreel had a vineyard in Jezreel that was next to the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. Ahab ordered Naboth, "Give me your vineyard so it can become my vegetable garden, because it is right next to my palace. In exchange for it, I'll give you an even better vineyard. Or if you prefer, I'll pay you the price in silver." Naboth responded to Ahab, "Lord forbid that I give you my family inheritance!" So Ahab went to his palace, irritated and upset at what Naboth had said to him—because Naboth had said, "I won't give you my family inheritance!" Ahab lay down on his bed and turned his face away. He wouldn't eat anything. His wife Jezebel came to him. "Why are you upset and not eating any food?" she asked. He answered her, "I was talking to Naboth. I said, 'Sell me your vineyard. Or if you prefer, I'll give you another vineyard for it.' But he said, 'I won't give you my vineyard!'" Then his wife Jezebel said to him, "Aren't you the one who rules Israel? Get up! Eat some food and cheer up. I'll get Naboth's vineyard for you myself." So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, putting his seal on them. She sent them to the elders and officials who lived in the same town as Naboth. This is what she wrote in the letters: "Announce a fast and place Naboth at the head of the people. Then bring in two liars in front of him and have them testify as follows: 'You cursed God and king!' Then take Naboth outside and stone him so he dies." The elders and the officials who lived in Naboth's town did exactly as Jezebel specified in the letters that she had sent. They announced a fast and placed Naboth at the head of the people. Then the two liars came and sat in front of him. They testified against Naboth in front of the people, "Naboth cursed God and king!" So the people took Naboth outside the town and stoned him so that he died. It was then reported to Jezebel, "Naboth was stoned. He's dead." As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned to death, she said to Ahab, "Get up and take ownership of the vineyard of Naboth, which he had refused to sell to you. Naboth is no longer alive; he's dead." When Ahab heard that Naboth had died, he got up and went down to Naboth's vineyard to take ownership of it.

Observation: The prophet Micah pronounced spiritual doom on "very powerful" people who "covet fields and seize them, houses and take them away." 1 Kings 21 recorded a sad historical incident in which Israel's King Ahab (egged on by his foreign queen Jezebel) did exactly that. In Israel's culture, Naboth had a much stronger reason to refuse to even trade his property to Ahab than we'd have today when property sales happen regularly. Each Israelite family viewed the land as their little piece of the covenant, that is, as an inheritance from God.

Application: Micah's prophetic word made it plain that Ahab's action was not an isolated instance. It had not just economic but spiritual implications. Inheritance in the land was a key part of not only agricultural life but also religious participation in Israel.... selling of land was akin to renouncing the promises and protection of Yahweh. Can you think of ways that "very powerful" people today might seek to ignore people's family and faith for their own profit?

Prayer: O God, I try to be modest about whatever power I hold over others. But however much or little power I have, teach me how to use it to bless others, not to exploit them. Amen.

Wednesday, March 24

Scripture: Psalm 73:2-14, 21-23

But me? My feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped because I envied the arrogant; I observed how the wicked are well off: They suffer no pain; their bodies are fit and strong. They are never in trouble; they aren't weighed down like other people. That's why they wear arrogance like a necklace, why violence covers them like clothes. Their eyes bulge out from eating so well; their hearts overflow with delusions. They scoff and talk so cruel; from their privileged positions they plan oppression. Their mouths dare to speak against heaven! Their tongues roam the earth! That's why people keep going back to them, keep approving what they say. And what they say is this: "How could God possibly know! Does the Most High know anything at all!" Look at these wicked ones, always relaxed, piling up the wealth! Meanwhile, I've kept my heart pure for no good reason; I've washed my hands to stay innocent for nothing. I'm weighed down all day long. I'm punished every morning.

When my heart was bitter, when I was all cut up inside, I was stupid and ignorant. I acted like nothing but an animal toward you. But I was still always with you! You held my strong hand!

Observation: Envy is practically a synonym for wanting what someone else has. Thomas Aquinas reportedly said that envy grieves when something good happens to our neighbor. This psalmist said envy warped his perceptions, and nearly led him to spiritual ruin. It made the lives of others seem ideal—they seemed to have no troubles at all (verses 3-5). It looked only at current conditions, and made serving God seem futile (verses 11, 13). But God never abandoned him (verse 23)!

Application: For this psalmist, "the prosperity of the wicked" nearly caused him to give up faith in God. But envy can also strike when we compare ourselves to any others who seem to have more than we do (see Mark 10:35-41). At what times in your life, if any, has the "success" of the wicked led you to ask, "Does the Most High know anything?" (verse 11) Whose position, possessions or prospects do you envy? How much does it matter to you how you or others reach "success"?

Prayer: Yes, Lord—I've had times of envying the apparent success of "the wicked," however I defined that. Thank you for never leaving me, and for guiding me toward a wiser understanding of the long-term benefits of serving you. Amen.

Thursday, March 25

Scripture: Matthew 6:25-33, 22:34-40

"Therefore, I say to you, don't worry about your life, what you'll eat or what you'll drink, or about your body, what you'll wear. Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds in the sky. They don't sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you worth much more than they are? Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? Notice how the lilies in the field grow. They don't wear themselves out with work, and they don't spin cloth. But I say to you that even Solomon in all of his splendor wasn't dressed like one of these. If God dresses grass in the field so beautifully, even though it's alive today and tomorrow it's thrown into the furnace, won't God do much more for you, you people of weak faith? Therefore, don't worry and say, 'What are we going to eat?' or 'What are we going to drink?' or 'What are we going to wear?' Gentiles long for all these things. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. Instead, desire first and foremost God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these

things will be given to you as well. When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had left the Sadducees speechless, they met together. One of them, a legal expert, tested him. "Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

He replied, "*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.* All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands."

Observation: The Tenth commandment spoke, not to outward actions, but to the heart. It said God cares not just about what we do, but about what we wish, in a serious way, that we could do. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus applied all the commandments even more broadly. He said the citizens of his kingdom were to control the thoughts and wishes of their hearts. "Desire first and foremost God's kingdom and God's righteousness," he said. In Matthew 22 he summed up the Ten Commandments in two other verses drawn from the Mosaic law.

Application: Scholar William Barclay wrote that Jesus called us to love God "not with a nebulous sentimentality but with that total commitment which issues in devotion to God and practical service of men." What are some signs that show your commitment to a task at work, to your mate or your kids, or to another important part of your life? In what ways is your commitment to trusting in, loving and serving God shaping your life around meaning, joy and peace?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, save me from "nebulous sentimentality," from thinking that serving you is all about "warm fuzzies." Guide me into the hard, practical work of living your commandments in day-to-day life. Amen.

Friday, March 26

Scripture: Romans 7:7-12

So what are we going to say? That the Law is sin? Absolutely not! But I wouldn't have known sin except through the Law. I wouldn't have known the desire for what others have if the Law had not said, *Don't desire to take what others have.* But sin seized the opportunity and used this commandment to produce all kinds of desires in me. Sin is dead without the Law. I used to be alive without the Law, but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life, and I died. So the commandment that was intended to give life brought death. Sin seized the opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and killed me. So the Law itself is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous, and good.

Observation: Mark 10:17-27 talked about a rich young man who asked how to obtain eternal life. Jesus pointed to at least some of the commandments. Scholar N. T. Wright said actually they were all in there: "Jesus' basic demand is not for some...extra observance.... It is for idols and covetousness to be thrown to the winds: sell up and give to the poor!....Jesus' new movement is indeed a radical revision of what it meant to be God's people, to follow the law of Moses." The apostle Paul, a rigid, rigorous Pharisee before he met Jesus, said the Tenth commandment made him realize that he, too, was a sinner.

Application: A mirror can show us things about ourselves we couldn't otherwise see, but no one washes their face with a mirror. Jesus' brother James compared God's law to a mirror (James 1:23-24). In Romans 7, Paul said the tenth commandment showed him that he needed

a Savior, no matter how proud he was of his Pharisaic outward righteousness (Philippians 3:4-7). When have you had moments of insight into things that needed to change inside you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, am I gripping anything so tightly that it is keeping me from a willingness to go “all in” to follow you? If so, help me find the way to let go of that obstacle, and to follow you with all my heart. Amen.

Saturday, March 27

Scripture: Philippians 4:11-14; 1 Timothy 6:6-10

I’m not saying this because I need anything, for I have learned how to be content in any circumstance. I know the experience of being in need and of having more than enough; I have learned the secret to being content in any and every circumstance, whether full or hungry or whether having plenty or being poor. I can endure all these things through the power of the one who gives me strength. Still, you have done well to share my distress.

Actually, godliness is a great source of profit when it is combined with being happy with what you already have. We didn’t bring anything into the world and so we can’t take anything out of it: we’ll be happy with food and clothing. But people who are trying to get rich fall into temptation. They are trapped by many stupid and harmful passions that plunge people into ruin and destruction. The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some have wandered away from the faith and have impaled themselves with a lot of pain because they made money their goal.

Observation: With stock market ebbs and flows, trade wars, the economic fallout caused by the pandemic, the financial news is full of words like “uncertainty,” “worry” and “fear.” Yet the itinerant preacher and craftsman (Acts 18:1-4) who wrote today’s readings had little money and owned no real property. Being happy with “what you already” have and “being content in any circumstance” sound different from today’s usual thinking. Paul used the same Greek word (autarkēs) as many Stoic philosophers. But he used it differently: The Stoic said, “I will learn content by a deliberate act of my own will.” Paul said, “I can do all things through Christ who infuses his strength into me.” The Stoic was self-sufficient; but Paul was Godsufficient.... Paul could face anything, because in every situation he had Christ.

Application: Paul, content even in prison, did not say, “I have a naturally contented heart.” No—in Philippians 4:11, he said, “I have learned how to be content in any circumstance.” Paul learned the same attitudes we can learn. Gratitude turns your attention to what you do have instead of what you don’t. People who recognize the blessings they have tend to think they’ll get happiness from things like fulfilling relationships—which, research shows, are the real sources of satisfaction. Under what conditions, good or bad, do you find it a struggle to remain content in God’s company? What experiences or examples have helped you learn to make choices or take actions that lead you toward accepting God’s gift of contentment?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, it’s my goal, but I’m not really there as far as being content in any circumstance. Keep teaching me and guiding me to that place of secure contentment. Amen.