

## I. Quotes:

A. Guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Prov. 4:32

B. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? <sup>2</sup> You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. James 4:1-2

## II. Introduction

A. O Magazine – which is published by Oprah – is not on my regular reading list, but a while back I was handed the September 2018 issue. Why? Because there on the cover, in big letters are two words: What If? Which is our question. What if we saw things differently? What if we did things differently? What if we followed God's counsel, which is on display in the Ten Commandments – these insights into the way the world actually works?

B. As you know, we are jumping ahead to the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment today because we thought this would be an easier commandment for you to invite others over to talk about than, say “adultery.” Things are about to start getting really busy. We thought that the next couple weeks was a better time to get together with others than in the middle of the holiday craziness. So we jumped to ten. Rest assured, next week we will back up so we cover commandments 8 and 9.

C. But today is ten – which reads: **You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.**”

## III. This commandment is important, unique, disruptive, serious and full of promise. Think about it.

A. For starters, it is important enough that it serves as a bookend. At first glance it may seem like the Commandments are fizzling out. They started all high and lofty with instruction about our relationship with God, and then they end here where we are told to stop looking at donkeys. You might read this and think, “really?” But donkeys is code for cars, and that is just one example. What we are being told is that we need to boundary our desire. In some ways the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment is the 1<sup>st</sup> commandment told over again, this time with a psychological twist. The 10th commandment is all about making sure God is first. What we are being told here is that there should be nothing you should want so badly that if you don't get it you are miserable.

B. It is unique in that historians do not know of any other ancient code that include a law like this – that governs desire. We know of plenty societies that said no to murder, stealing, adultery, lying. But none that talk about our heart.

C. It is disruptive not only because it addresses our thoughts, but because it commands us to be content. Let's not miss this. The tenth commandment is a commandment. We are being told to be happy with what we have, which, by the way, is a pretty unamerican thing to say. Our economy needs us to be discontent. The US GDP depends upon you wanting more and better stuff - a nicer life - to keep buying so that the markets keep moving up and to the right.

1. It didn't use to be that way. It used to be that you went to the store to buy things you needed. There was a small waiting area and a huge warehouse. You didn't go into the warehouse - you didn't see things and then decide you wanted them. Woolworths was the first department store to display its wares. And they found there was a nice profit to be made by encouraging want. By encouraging people to break the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment.

D. So far I have said "Do not covet" is important, unique and disruptive. It is also serious. Now, all of the commandments are serious, but my guess is that God takes this one more seriously than you think. The New Testament has several lists of bad things - and when we read them we find coveting right in the thick of things.

1. Romans 1:28f we read: **"... so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy**

2. We see something like it in Ephesians 5:3: **But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.**

E. Finally, this commandment is also full of promise. Some of you are unhappy and unsettled and you keep thinking that life will be better once - fill in the blank: you get the new car, you get your bosses job, you have as much money as she has. This commandment says, you can be settled, content, now. This commandment implies that it is seldom about stuff. It is much more about our heart. God tells us that we can be content - and wouldn't that be an amazing thing.

1. Many of you can hardly sleep at night because you WANT. Maybe not your neighbor's ox or donkey - as the commandment reads - but maybe their spouse. You want their husband or wife - "if only I was married to him, he's so attentive to their kids, he hasn't gained weight. He fixes things, he makes so much money." "If only I was married to her, she is so thoughtful, so attractive, she doesn't whine."

2. If only I had his job. If only I had her house or kids or figure or ... I'd be happy then.

3. The tenth commandment says, "stop playing that game." It doesn't work that way. It is seldom about the stuff. It's almost always about our heart. You can be content.

IV. OK, let's back up and dig a bit deeper into what we are being told in Exodus 20:17. The passage begins: **You shall not covet your neighbor's house.**

A. Covet is not a word we use very often. We do not have a good English word that works here. The Hebrew term used in Exodus is *hamad*, which means "to praise too much." When it is used in Arabic it's a positive term. In fact, *hamad* is the second half of the word *Mohamad*, which means to "praise Allah." But in Hebrew it doesn't mean "to praise," it means "to praise too much."

B. In the Deuteronomy passage - as you may know, the Ten Commandments are repeated in Deuteronomy with a few minor tweaks. In Deuteronomy a different Hebrew word is used: *ana*. This word means "to earnestly desire" something. It's a good word, but when it's intensified, like it is here, it become a negative thing. It means we want something "too much." What we are talking about is desire gone bad.

C. So, when we read 20:17: **You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, his ox or donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.** What we are being told is that we must keep our desires in check.

D. It's not that desire is always bad. There are good wants. Christianity is not Buddhism,<sup>1</sup> which says life is suffering because we have all of these wants, and the way to reach Nirvana is to learn to not want.

E. C. S. Lewis had some great things to say about our desires.

1. He suggests that they point us to heaven, arguing that the fact that we always want something more suggests that we were made for something more. "If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world."

2. But he also says that our desires are OK – it's not wrong to want things. Our chief problem with our desires is not that they are too strong

---

<sup>1</sup> In Buddhism the human predicament is caused by craving and desire. The Four Noble Truths state: 1) Life is suffering; 2) suffering is caused by craving; 3) Nirvana is reached and suffering is ended when we stop craving; and 4) consequently, liberation is found in freedom from craving – which can be reached by following the Eightfold Path.

but too weak. “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

- F. Desire is not wrong. Jesus had desires – for food (when he fasted), for water (he was thirsty on the cross), for his own way (in the Garden he said, “I do not want to do this.”). He had desires but did not sin.
- G. We are not being told that desire is wrong, but that we should not want things that are not ours too much. What we are being told is that we need to fight the tendency to envy, jealousy, greed and lust.<sup>2</sup> Whether its honor or power or gold or fame or your neighbor’s wife – or husband - if you don’t have it and you really want it – if you are envious and unsettled because you don’t have it, then you are coveting.<sup>3</sup>
- V. The basic point of the tenth commandment is that we should not live in a state of perpetual desire. We should not let what we don’t have ruin our life. Or, to put it another way, we should be thankful for what God has given us.
- A. Which makes this a fundamentally different kind of commandment than the others because it is focused so completely on our attitudes and aspirations not simply our actions.
- B. We know from the Sermon on the Mount – again, Christ’s commentary on the law – that this is the case with the other commandments. But with those we don’t get that until the New Testament. Here, with the tenth, it’s clear from the start.
- C. God is not just trying to shut down wrong living. He is trying to shut down wrong thinking. It’s not just our appearance that God wants to clean up – it’s our heart. And to that end this commandment is unlike anything we’d find on the books today.

VI. Well, how am I supposed to do that? Hey, we live in a world that affirms desire – that deifies want, that hates and ridicules any suggestion that we should conform to some standard or external ideal. We must be true to our heart. To be fully alive is to embrace our wants.

---

<sup>2</sup> By the way, there is also a Reader’s Digest version of this commandment that picks up on the lust side of this quite well. It was given by a little boy who was asked to state the tenth commandment said: You shall not pull the covers off your neighbor’s wife. That’s not too far from it.

<sup>3</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism reads: Q: What is required in the tenth commandment? A: The tenth commandment requireth full contentment with our own condition, with a right and charitable frame of spirit toward our neighbour, and all that is his.

A. I have talked about this before – noting that about thirty years ago, the definition of freedom changed from the classic understanding of freedom, as the freedom to do the right thing, the freedom of discipline - to the current understanding: the freedom from discipline. I noted that an athlete has the freedoms that come from practice and being in shape – he or she is able to do things.

1. A musician enjoys the freedom that comes from thousands of hours of practice.

B. Today we want – and often demand – the freedom to not do the hard work and yet we expect the perks. It doesn't work that way.

C. My point here is, many today are not very familiar with mental discipline, with controlling our thoughts, but the Ten Commandments in general – and this one in particular, make it clear that what we think about matters. It's not just our actions that get God's attention, our thoughts do as well. And we need to learn to discipline our thoughts.

VII. So, how do we learn not to covet? There are a handful of things that we can do and one big insight. There are four things developed in the Bible that you can also find in *O Magazine*.<sup>4</sup>

A. Stop looking. If you don't go to the mall – or surf Amazon – there is a whole lot of stuff you do not want. I do not shop much. Like many of you, I run for pleasure and to stay in shape. I go to the mall, walk down it once and am exhausted. My first surprise about the mall is how tired it makes me. The second is how much stuff it makes me want. Stuff I didn't even know about ten minutes earlier.

---

<sup>4</sup> Another point that could be developed here is that we should learn to accept that life isn't fair - make peace with the fact that things are not fair on this side of eternity. People are different. The Constitution might claim that we were all created equal, but there is very little about us that is equal. Some people are wealthy, others are poor; some are tall, others are short; some have good verbal skills, others good technical skills; some of you will have or have had an easy life, others are struggling. God doesn't promise us equal gifts, equal opportunities or equal lives. In Romans 9:20 Paul points out that it is God's prerogative to set things up differently: But who are you O Man, to talk to God. Shall what is formed say to Him who formed it, "Why did you make me like this?" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble use and some for common use?" Let me pause here to note that this passage can be easily misused. Those who have a lot – more than they need, are expected to share. Those born on third base need to realize that they are not better and be generous. Those who identify with Christ are expected to fight injustice and attend to the needs of those who are struggling. Those to whom much has been given, much is expected. There is a sermon to be preached on this topic, but it is not this sermon. The tenth commandment has a different trajectory than Matthew 25 or . What the tenth commandment says is, stop expecting life on this side of the grave to be fair. Learn to find joy in the success of others.

1. I remember watching an ad for trucks and thinking, “Boy, I’d like a truck. A man’s vehicle. Every guy should have one. My life would be better if I had a truck. Just think of all the times I’ve needed one lately.” And then I thought about it and couldn’t think of one.
  2. I do not lug around a lot of tools. I carry books and a lap top. And at the time we had three kids at home, which meant, unless I tied one of them down in the back, a truck was pretty impractical.
- B. Stop comparing – it’s a deeply flawed exercise.
1. It’s dangerously limited because it focuses on this life alone – not on eternity - and it’s dangerous because we not only compare from a distance—never really knowing the people’s whose lives we are wanting to co-opt. But we also compare selectively. We can choose to contrast our net worth with Bezos or Buffet’s; our appearance with some Victoria Secret model or our compassion with Mother Teresa – in which case we feel bad. We lose every one of those comparisons.
  2. Or we go the other way and think, my income is higher than Mother Teresa’s, or I’m better looking than Warren Buffet. My point is, comparison is often of very limited value.
  3. The Bible doesn’t encourage us to contrast our live against our neighbors but against Christ or the law. You want to know how you are doing, measure your life against the Ten Commandments. These are the right answers.
  4. Interestingly, in Robinson Crusoe, after Crusoe has been rescued, and enters back into Europe, he finds it spiritually unsettling. He had existed “where I wanted nothing but what I had, and had nothing but what he wanted.” Upon returning he started accumulating stuff and seeing other stuff.
- C. There are two more things on the common sense list: learn the joy of giving.
1. I remember learning this lesson shortly after we got married. We didn’t have much, and Sheri was volunteering at a Food Bank where she worked alongside an older woman who had almost nothing and was always cold. When Sheri asked, the woman said something about the fact that she didn’t control the thermostat in her apartment. So Sheri said, “Let’s give her our space heater.” I wasn’t thrilled about the idea. On cold mornings I’d essentially hug the thing, but she persisted. So we gave it to this old woman. And Sheri said, to her disbelief, the old woman gave it to this young mother about 10 minutes later. And she did so with great joy.

That was a real lesson for both of us, that joy comes from serving, not from having.

2. Envy is one of the worst feelings. Learning to love and delight in joy in someone else's life is one of the great lessons.

D. Reflect long enough to know that none of the other things you thought would bring contentment, brought contentment for long.

1. Chances are, you have the gotten a job you wanted or bought the toy you thought would make you happy – and that worked for about ten minutes.<sup>5</sup>

2. It is easy to buy into the lie that happiness is just one promotion away; one raise away; one degree away; one new car away; one new toy away; one vacation away – but it's not. And if we reflected a bit more we'd realize that sooner.

**VIII. Which brings us to the secret – which brings us to Philippians 4:10, where Paul writes: *I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for 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. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.***

IX. Paul is making quite a claim. He says he knows the secret of contentment in the face of every circumstance - even torture and death.

A. Think about how much money people – you spend – on stuff (clothes, food, therapy, whatever) in order to be happy, content. Paul says, I know the secret!

B. He writes this letter to the Philippians from a first century Roman jail cell. He is facing torture and death, and he says, "I'm fine."

C. And the tenth commandment not only says "stop being consumed with what you don't have," it commands it.

---

<sup>5</sup> By the way, it may be best to say there are two secrets, because the Greek philosophers named one.<sup>5</sup> They called it the Hedonism or Pleasure Paradox, which notes that: Pleasure is best as a by-product not the main pursuit. And what satisfied on Monday isn't enough on Tuesday.

X. What is his secret? What does he know that most others do not? There are two things to note from this passage. The first is that he learned – not discovered, but learned some things by going to the extremes. Having it all and having nothing. The suggestion is that most of us do not go to either extreme, so we miss it.

A. 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.<sup>6</sup>

B. One of the big takeaways here is that idols – false contentment, call it whatever – are exposed by plenty or want.

C. Men and women, we can gain these insights from the Book, or we gain them from going to the extremes. From plenty or want.

D. If we pay attention, we see that many of those on the top are not happy.

1. There are two situations in which people end their own life: when they do not have any of the things they want and think they will never get them, or when they get it all.<sup>7</sup>

2. A very perceptive statement was made by a New York celebrity writer, Cynthia Heimel. Back in 1990 she wrote, I pity celebrities, no I really do – Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis, and Barbara Streisand, were once perfectly pleasant human beings. But now their wrath is awful. I think when God wants to play a really rotten practical joke on you he grants you your deepest wish and then laughs merrily when you realize you want to kill yourself. You see Sly, Bruce, and Barbara wanted fame. They worked, they pushed and the morning after each of them became famous they wanted to take an overdose. Because that giant thing they were striving for, that fame thing that was going to make everything OK, that was going to make their lives bearable, that was going to provide them with personal fulfillment and happiness had happened and they were still them. The disillusionment turned them howling and insufferable.<sup>8</sup>

E. This sounds like many passages in the Bible.

1. Romans 1. People chase something that they think will bring joy, only to discover it doesn't.

2. Ecclesiastes 5:10 says that if we want money, money will never be enough.

---

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Tim Keller for this insight, from his sermon on Phil. 4:10-13.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Gibbons said, – when you take away the life lie of anyone, they lose their happiness.

<sup>8</sup> Cynthia Heimel, “Tongue in Chic” column in *The Village Voice*, January 2, 1990.



3. Psalm 73 talks about someone who was almost overwhelmed by his coveting, until he sat and thought about it and then ran to God.

F. The problem is, most people never get to the very top or go to the very bottom, and those who do seldom slow down long enough to reflect on what is going on. We stay in the veil of illusion for a long time.

1. This is vintage Thomas Merton, who noted that many people spend their whole life climbing the ladder of success, only to get to the top and realize that it is leaning on the wrong wall.

XI. The second insight from Phil 4:10 is the secret itself.

A. What is the secret Paul writes about? What is the secret to contentment? It is Christ. It is God. It is service to God, knowledge of God, God's approval. I know that sounds like a cliché' but it's the answer.

B. If you are not content you have four options. You can:

1. Blame the things: I need a better spouse, career, figure, etc. I need a new dream. If you chose this, you end up driven, anxious and always unhappy.

2. Blame yourself: I am just not good enough. You miss the fact that most other people have these same anxieties. There is truth here, but you are approaching it wrong. You are likely going to think your problems are psychological and ultimately our problems are deeper than that.<sup>9</sup>

3. Blame the universe: The whole set up is fatally flawed.

4. Or you can blame your relationship with God. You start by acknowledging what your heart knows – there is a god, and I was built for this God. And you lean in because you realize, only He can satisfy my desires. Men and women, this is the way out. This is the secret Paul had learned. The way to contentment comes out of a relationship with God. Do not give up on God and going deeper with God.

---

<sup>9</sup> “All the analysis in the world doesn't allow the person to find out who he is and why he is here on earth, why he has to die, and how he can make his life a triumph. It is when psychology pretends to do this, when it offers itself as a full explanation of human unhappiness, that it becomes a fraud that makes the situation of modern man on impasse from which he cannot escape.” Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*

5. And part of what the tenth commandment is trying to drive home is, we must see our needs for what they are. We must not mask them. We need to see coveting for what it is. The only thing we are going to want so much that if you do not get it we will be miserable are things we are putting ahead of God.

6. It is OK to want, but not that much. The only things we want that much are idols.<sup>10</sup>

7. Idols are things that: 1) psychologically give us self-esteem and identity; 2) or sociologically things that give us credibility with other people; 3) or theologically they are things that we think make you feel acceptable before God.

8. We do not think we can be content without them.

9. The fact is, we will never be content with them.

10. In one sense, commandments 1, 2 and 3 are wrapped together.

C. Men and women, if you are miserable – seriously not content! - ask yourself: what, besides God, do I think I need to be happy?<sup>11</sup> What besides Jesus has become the source of my joy, my identity, my salvation, my well-being, my preoccupation, my loyalty or my delight

D. When you are down you have to ask this question. You've got to learn communion with God - not just praying, but seeking, meditating, experiencing God in your heart. You must sink into the love of Christ. You must learn the truth of I Timothy 6:6 – that, “Godliness with contentment is great gain.”

E. How do I do that? Don't stop until you learn. One way involves coming to the communion table. As we are about to do.

F. What if... what if I wasn't overwhelmed with inappropriate wants – putting off joy until something else happens.

---

<sup>10</sup> Idols are things that: 1) psychologically give you self-esteem and identity; 2) sociologically they are things that give you credibility with other people; 3) theologically they are things that you think make you feel acceptable before God.

<sup>11</sup> Keller asks, “What, besides God, has taken title to my heart's functional trust?”