

## **Ten Commandments Series: Ten Keys to the Joyful Life**

### **#10: “Being Content with Your Blessings”**

#### **1 Kings 21:1-21 (NLT) and Exodus 20:17 (NIV)**

By Rev. John Gill

Perhaps you remember the movie, “Indecent Proposal,” that starred Robert Redford, Demi Moore, and Woody Harrelson. It was the story of a married couple who decided to take a vacation in Las Vegas. Of course, while they were there, they had to try their hand at gambling. They lost money, but they won some, too.

While at the casino, they met and befriended a handsome and friendly multi-millionaire. He invited them to his place for a drink, and as they visited over a game of pool, their conversation turned to the subjects of happiness and money. The millionaire insisted that money could buy love. The couple argued that it just wasn’t so. No one can buy love. Some things are too precious to put a price-tag on.

That’s when the millionaire made his “indecent proposal.” He suggested the following wager: If the wife would spend one night with him, he would give the couple \$1,000,000. Immediately, the couple rejected the idea and left, intending never to see the man again. But as time passed, they began to imagine what they could do with \$1,000,000. And so, they decided to take him up on his offer. She would spend the night, collect the money in the morning, and then they would simply go back to their life the way it was – only a whole lot richer! So, they contacted the millionaire and sealed the deal.

But things didn’t go quite as the couple had planned. The woman had expected to have a miserable time, but it wasn’t to be. This charming millionaire pulled out all the stops. He was suave, sophisticated, and polite. He wined and dined her, and treated her like a princess. By the time morning came, she had just about convinced herself that she no longer loved her husband, but would prefer life with this handsome rich stranger.

Well, the good news is that, in the end, she comes to her senses and returns to the arms of her husband. But not before she learned just how dangerous the “sin of coveting” can be.

Today, we come to the final of the Ten Commandments: “Thou shalt not covet...” What does it mean to “covet?”

Well, the dictionary defines coveting this way: “to desire inordinately or without due regard for the rights of others.” In other words, to desire what we have no right to desire.

Notice that desire and coveting are not the same thing. Desire, in and of itself, is a good thing. It motivates us and helps us achieve great things in life. It only becomes bad when the desire we have is for that which is wrong, or which violates the rights of others. (For instance, desire for your spouse is a good thing – but desire for your neighbor’s spouse is not.)

The movie, “Indecent Proposal,” is a perfect illustration of the dangers of “coveting.” The couple coveted the \$1,000,000 that was not theirs, and the millionaire coveted the woman who was not his. And just as in our scripture about Nabath’s vineyard, coveting, as innocent as it may seem at first, can cause us to commit sins we would never have even considered under normal circumstances.

That’s why this commandment ranks a place among God’s top-ten. Unlike some of the others that condemn “action” sins (such as murder, stealing, adultery, or lying), this 10th commandment focuses, not on our actions, but on our attitudes – attitudes that can give birth to actual sins. As one commentator on the Ten Commandments puts it, “Covetousness opens the door to other sins.”

I suppose that, of all the commandments, you could argue that this one is the most often broken. Who could say that they have NEVER coveted something or someone that was not theirs – that they never “desired inordinately or without due regard for the rights of others?” Who among us *hasn’t* been jealous of a neighbor who drives home one day in a brand new expensive car? Can you honestly say that you don’t covet the millions won by those who win the lottery? Maybe your childhood sweetheart went off and married someone else, and to this day you wish YOU were the one he or she had married – you still covet her or him. Or perhaps, a friend or coworker gets a promotion or a big raise and you are left behind, seething with jealousy.

Yes, we are all guilty of coveting what is not ours. We can’t seem to help it. Even if we never act on our feelings, this commandment says we are still sinning.

I believe we fall into the trap of this sin because we have been conditioned by our society to believe two myths – lies that have set us up for a life of coveting:

**1) First, our society has convinced us that, in order to be considered successful in life, we have to have accumulated all the “right stuff” – wealth, possessions, prestige, power, and position.**

Therefore, we believe that, unless we can “keep up with the Joneses,” we will be deemed a failure. We just HAVE to have the new car, the bigger house, the boat, the RV, the vacation, the retirement home – even the “trophy wife” (or “trophy husband,” if there is such a thing!). So we will spend ourselves into the poor house, or wreck our marriage and destroy our family, in order to try to win the world’s approval – because the world measures our success based on what we have.

**2) The second myth we have come to believe is that, by accumulating the stuff we desire, we will find happiness and satisfaction in life. Not only do others measure our success in life by what we have, but WE determine our own self-worth based on our possessions.**

And therefore, we spend our lives coveting what OTHERS have, working ourselves to death in order to accumulate wealth, and obsessively longing for more. As a man named Richard Foster put it, “We are suffocated by a four letter obscenity – ‘M.O.R.E.’” We believe that the secret to happiness and satisfaction in life is in accumulating more stuff. Or as the bumper sticker so aptly said it, “The one who dies with the most toys, wins.”

That millionaire believed that money can buy happiness, and by looking at the way many of us live, WE seem to believe it, too.

But there’s a problem with those two myths on which we have based our lives – they are fraudulent. Covetousness (and acquiring that which we covet) is not the answer to finding happiness and satisfaction in life. In fact, the exact opposite is true. Far from bringing us happiness, covetousness actually prevents our happiness. That’s because covetousness prevents our seeing what we already have – or if we see it, it keeps us from recognizing its true value.

Russell Conwell made famous a story about a wealthy Persian man who heard that somewhere in the world there was a vast store of diamonds. Every night, he went to bed “a poor man” – poor because he was discontented – and discontented because he SAW himself as being poor. So, he sold his farm and set out on a worldwide search for the illusive “acres of diamonds” he had heard about, until he had spent his entire fortune on the quest.

After his death, the “acres of diamond” he had so desperately sought were finally discovered – right on his very own farm, - the one he had sold!

You see, the bitter irony of covetousness is that it makes us blind to what we already have, preventing us from recognizing our blessings.

The opposite of Covetousness is Contentment. While covetousness steals our happiness because we always feel we need to have more than we have, contentment brings us happiness because, freed from our obsession to gain more, we can be thankful to God for what we already have.

The truth is that covetousness and contentment are mutually exclusive. Unless we are content with what we have, we cannot have a spirit of gratitude and thanksgiving. Or, as we read in the Letter to the Hebrews (13:5) “Be content with what you have...” If we are content with what we have, then we will be truly rich! You see, there are really two ways to be rich in this life: 1) to have much; or 2) to need little. True wealth is in being satisfied with what you already have.

Tauler of Strasbourg was a mystic and saint who lived in the 14th century. One day he learned a lesson about contentment from an anonymous beggar – a lesson we all should take to heart.

“God give you a good day, my friend,” Tauler said as he met the beggar. The beggar quickly answered, “I thank God that I’ve never had a bad day!” Tauler was silent for a moment, then

said, "God give you a happy life, my friend." And the beggar answered, "I thank God I am never unhappy."

Now Tauler was a little flustered. "Never unhappy?" he said, "What do you mean?" "Well," the beggar replied, "When it is fine, I thank God; when it rains, I thank God; when I have plenty, I thank God; when I am hungry, I thank God; and since God's will is my will, and whatever pleases Him pleases me, why should I say I am unhappy when I am not?"

Tauler was now in awe of his wise new friend. "Who are you?" he asked. "I am a king," said the beggar. "A king?" said Tauler, half ready to believe it. "Then, where is your kingdom?" The man in rags spoke calmly, but with conviction. "In my heart," he whispered, "In my heart."

My friends, there is only one way to break the strangle-hold that covetousness has on your life, and discover true contentment. And that is to recognize that satisfaction and happiness in life do not come from the outside – but the inside.

Maxie Dunnam, in his commentary on Exodus, says this: "We wrongly end up coveting that which can never make us happy, failing to realize that what matters most is not what becomes of us, but what we become."

Or as the Apostle Paul puts it in Philippians: "I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (4:1-13)

In other words, it's not what we HAVE that matters. You see, what matters is what we ARE inside. That, my friends, is the final "key to the joyful life."

So the challenge of this tenth commandment is this: Do you have a heart of covetousness and greed, or do you have a heart of contentment and thanksgiving.

Are you a joyous beggar – or a miserable king?